A theory of African-American archetypes: big mama and the whistlin' woman

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BIG MAMA AND THE WHISTLIN’ WOMAN: A THEORY
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHETYPES

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES

BY
JAN ALEXIA HOLSTON

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
DECEMBER 2010
ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

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M.ED. MERCER UNIVERSITY, 2005

BIG MAMA AND THE WHISTLIN’ WOMAN: A THEORY
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHETYPES

Committee Chair: Georgene Bess-Montgomery, Ph.D.

Dissertation dated December 2010

This study introduces a literary Theory of African-American Archetypes, which is an outgrowth of two parent theories, Archetypal Criticism and African-American Literary Criticism. The theory posits that the folklore of Africana peoples created and inform culturally specific archetypes, which are deeply seeded in the collective unconscious of many African Americans. As in life, such archetypes are prevalent in African-American literature, which is momentous because they are both historic and perpetual within the community.

The African-American Archetypal Big Mama is the character that will be used to demonstrate the theory as a viable form of literary criticism, using Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day. Examination of her opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman, in Tina McElroy Ansa’s Ugly Ways and Taking After Mudear will substantiate and define the African-American Archetypal Big Mama by negation. Elucidation and application of the theory to African-American literature are significant because they widen the criticism particularly for texts
by and for African Americans. Additionally, the application opens the doors for critics of multi-ethnic literature to examine their own cultural idiosyncrasies and subsequent lore for archetypes explicit to their literary traditions.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my husband, Dwight Holston, who is my greatest supporter and best friend. Without his encouragement and support, this journey would have been impossible. I owe sincere thanks to my children, Jaylen and Jana Rose Holston, whose innocent sense of wonder with the world and love of learning continue to inspire me. I wish to extend heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Georgene Bess-Montgomery and Dr. Mary Arnold Twining, whose matchless intellectual prowess planted the seeds of thought for this project. Dr. Alma Vinyard’s loving, patient manner acted as my rock of peace throughout my career as a student, and now professor, at Bethune-Cookman University. More than just my professors or committee members, these women provided me with the extraordinary academic environment that I will forever call home; they have inspired me much more than they will ever know. I wish to thank my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Boulware, for being proud of me, my siblings, especially Mrs. Wendy Benton, whose listening ear was tireless, and my best friends, Mrs. Ahsaki Scharpon and Mrs. Tamala Rigby-Simmons, whose warm words of encouragement flowed frequently throughout the tedious process of writing, allowing me to see the finish line ahead. Finally, to my Big Mama, Mrs. Rachel Ford Brown, your memory and your presence was the gentle, loving voice that saw me through to the end.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Theory of African-American Archetypes is the combination of two widely accepted forms of literary criticism, Archetypal Criticism and African-American Literary Criticism. Its purpose is to analyze and interpret literature by and for African Americans through the identification of archetypes, or patterns of behavior, specific to the African-American experience, as evidenced through Africana folklore. The primary questions that this work seeks to answer are as follows: 1) What makes an archetype particularly African American? 2) How and why do African-American Archetypes present a fuller understanding of African-American literature and culture? To that end and for demonstrative purposes of the theory, the African-American Archetypal character Big Mama will be explored in this dissertation. Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* presents the African-American Archetypal Big Mama in her purest form; thus criticism of the novel will serve as justification for the theory. Big Mama’s opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman, will also be examined in two works by Tina McElroy Ansa: *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*. Surveying Big Mama’s opposite will substantiate her existence in life and literature because as such a powerful African-American Archetype, she can also be defined by negation. The pronounced dichotomy that this juxtaposition will present is significant because it converges the imperfections of archetypes in life to the literature.

While the Theory of African-American Archetypes is a novel theoretical approach to literature, many influential works informed the formulation of the Theory of African-
American Archetypes, the most notable of which are Carl Jung’s *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* and *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, Henry Louis Gate’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* and Georgene Bess-Montgomery’s *The Spirit and the Word: A Theory of Spirituality in Africana Literary Criticism*. Also significant to this work are Robert Ferris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* and *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway, as both texts provide an explicit cultural bridge between Africans in America and their predecessors in West and Central Africa. Primary texts which support the value of Africana lore are Zora Neale Hurston’s *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, Daryl Cumber Dance’s *From My People: 400 Years of African-American Folklore*, Isidore Okpewho’s *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, Continuity*, Roger Abraham’s *African Folktales*, Harold Courlander’s *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*, A.B. Ellis’s *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc.*, Mary Granger’s *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes’s *Step it Down: Games, Plays, Songs and Stories From the Afro-American Heritage*, and Geneva Smitherman’s *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Each of the aforementioned texts provide support for the Theory of African-American Archetypes in that they connect the study of Africana folklore, which generated the archetypes, to theory and literary criticism. Many other scholars have posited that certain archetypes are especially prevalent in African-American literature. For example, Ikenna Dieke’s dissertation, entitled *Archetypal Patterns in African, Afro-American and Caribbean Literature*, explores the African-American writer’s attempt to
fit a distinctive culture into the mainstream archetypal world of literature (as a symbolic form of returning “home” to that which was forgotten in African culture). She implies that certain archetypes are informed by a figurative home in the folklore of African culture, which were redefined by the deplorable conditions of Africans in America. Similarly, Alma Jean Billingslea Brown’s dissertation, The Folk Aesthetic in Contemporary African-American Women’s Fiction and Visual Art, analyzes the use and transformation of folkloric elements in the fiction of African-American women during the decade of the 1970's and the early 1980's in conjunction with visual art by women of the same era. However, while Billingslea-Brown makes the connection between literature and what is in essence lore, she deals primarily with artistic expression and falls short of creating a theory of archetypes to support that association.

Additionally, Angelita Reyes’s Crossing the Bridge: The Great Mother in Selected Novels of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Simone Schwartz-Bart and Mariama Ba is a dissertation that presents a cross-cultural literary analysis of the meaning of the “Great Mother” in four novels by contemporary Black women writers throughout the African Diaspora. In the work, Reyes examines the representations of the “Great Mother,” identifying quite a range and combination of attributes and what amounts to an archetype. While she identifies archetypes specific to Africana motherhood, she fits such literature into the archetype, without making them specifically relevant in terms of the Diasporic Africana experience. This work, by contrast, represents the gaps in the discourse of literary criticism that fails to give credence to what are particularly culturally explicit African-American Archetypes found within the specialized collective unconscious of African Americans.

Archetypal images are generally ascribed to Carl Jung’s notion of humanity’s
"collective unconscious"—the part of the human mind that stores all of the knowledge, experiences, and images of the entire human race: “According to Jung, people from all over the world respond to certain myths or stories in the same way, not because everyone knows and appreciates the same story but because lying deep in our collective unconscious are the species’ memories of humanity’s past” (Bressler 150). Therefore, humanity reacts in the same way towards such images and/or themes as the elements, birth, death, rebirth, and motherhood because they are all memories from the cumulative wisdom of the human species.

Of course, as archetypes are found in life, they are also found in literature because art imitates life. In fact, good literature often mirrors life. Northrop Frye, literary critic and author of Archetypal Criticism, built upon Jung’s psychoanalytic theory of archetypes, adding that recognition of archetypes in literature allows for a literary critic to decipher underlying meanings from literature, making it a form of literary criticism (Booker 34). Thus, exploring archetypes as a tool for literary and cultural excavation allows the archetypal literary critic to find commonalities in the literature that all human beings share, uncovering meaningful veins of interpretation. The Theory of African-American Archetypes is a plausible extension of both Jung’s theory and Frye’s literary criticism. For, if there are countless situations and experiences which over time can create an archetype from repeated patterns of behavior, then the unique, repeated experiences of racial prejudice and marginalization from the mainstream society in America created culturally specific archetypes for African Americans:

There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic condition, not in the form of images filled with content, but at first only as forms without
content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action. When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which, like an instinctual drive, gains its way against all reason and will [...]. (Jung 48)

Hence, the typical situation of physical and psychological bondage for both slaves and ex-slaves created a distinctly separate cultural climate, which in turn caused reactions to the resulting patterns or archetypes. Robinson collapses the experience thusly: “African-American beliefs are metaphysical traditions belonging to an African worldview adapted to an American milieu” (364). An example of such a belief, tradition, or reaction is the matchless reverence and respect that many African Americans have toward the African-American Archetypal Big Mama.

More than just a mother, Big Mama is a Super-Mother of sorts in the minds of many within the African-American community: “Although the figure of the mother as it appears in folklore is more or less universal, this image changes markedly when it appears in the individual psyche” (Jung 82). The individual psyche is indeed distinct, but for many African Americans, the Archetypal Big Mama is also quite collective. Consequently, making use of archetypes is quite a way for readers and literary critics to connect with and respond to culture, here of African Americans: “The archetypal symbols found within literature help to emphasize and portray the allegory and ‘deeper’ story every author is telling” (Bressler 151). In addition to archetypal literary criticism, African-American Literary Criticism is also an effective vein of literary analysis, as it also uncovers layers of cultural significance. It lends itself well to the theory of archetypes, as its preeminent goal is to honor and expose cultural ideologies and
boundaries in literature for and about African Americans.

African-American Literary Theory gives special attention to the historical and societal factors that created and continue to sustain the duality of being both African and American in origin. Therefore, recognition of (and reverence for) such things as dialectical style and a distinct African-American "voice" of a text are necessary for the critic of African-American literature because in many ways the folklore from that distinct "voice" defines culture. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author of *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, described this phenomenon as "double voicedness" or that ethereal quality of African-American literature that uses language and "voice" in order to paint a picture of African-American life (Gates xxv). Such voice is found in the folklore or oral transmission of the culture of African Americans.

Thus, it follows that the key element in determining both the validity of the theory and of the African-American Archetype itself is folklore. According to Isidore Okpewho, "[...] the folklore of a people consists essentially of two kinds of activity: what these people traditionally say (e.g. songs, proverbs, tales) and what they traditionally do (weaving, dancing, rituals)” (5). Folklore answers the question about how the African-American collective unconscious was formed because folklore is both the vehicle and the repository of culture.

As it is orally transmitted, folklore continues to shape the collective unconscious of African Americans. Daryl Dance writes, "Folklore is a group creation that by its very being—its conception, transmission, and survival—reveals a great deal about the realities of life of that group—about their experiences and reactions to those experiences” (xxxvi). Further, folklore explains how African-American Archetypes persist within the culture. It is what makes a people who they are—what they say, how they say it, what they do on
a daily basis, and how they do it. As Dance aptly noted, "There is probably no body of materials as rich and informative, as interesting and entertaining, as tragic and painful, as humorous and healing, as honest and imaginative, as provocative and disturbing, as broad and diverse, as universal and distinctive as African-American Folklore" (xxxiii). Folklore does not involve pomp and circumstance; it entails the daily ins and outs of living and relating to others. Folklore is the hallmark of culture and while culture is not explicit to African Americans, the reverence and preference for the artistic orality of the culture is particularly African. This amalgamation of culture as evidenced in life and literature of modern African Americans is why the Theory of African-American Archetypes is distinctive.

Truly, within this distinct African-American "voice," with all of its style, cadence, and vivid imagery, there are often deeply imbedded archetypal images to be found in the life and literature of African Americans: "Anyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black" (Gates xxiv). Indeed, the purpose of identifying and applying the Theory of African-American Archetypes to African-American literature is to use it as a mining tool to unearth the multifaceted jewels that are markers of the African-American experience. As Gates writes, "[...] I hope to enhance the reader's experience of black texts by identifying levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise remain mediated, or buried beneath the surface. If anything, my desire here has been to demystify the curious notion that theory is the province of the Western tradition, something alien or removed from a so-called noncanonical tradition such as that of the Afro-American" (xx). Therefore, it is my contention that the critic of African-American literature should recognize the fact that African-American Archetypes
found within life and literature may be used to both illuminate and define the ever changing, ever-constant beauty of what it means to be African American.

While African-American literature can be critiqued using mainstream Western literary criticism, the literature is also separate and distinct because of the added strata of voice, experience, and overall lore that are indelible marks of the culture. For these added dimensions of African-American literature, there must be an added dimension to the subsequent criticism. Of her own literary theory of African Spirituality centered on Africana Literary Criticism, Bess Montgomery writes,

The Ifa Paradigm can then, in fact, be thought of as informing other modes of criticism because it allows for an investigation of cultural specificities that may inform a literary text. The need for such criticism is there precisely because the departure point for understanding literary expression by so called minority cultures is of the frame of the dominant culture, which is tantamount to prescribing for everyone the same prescription glasses, a dangerous practice that fails to take into account any other realities. (180)

The Theory of African-American Archetypes is an answer to that call. For, embedded in Bess-Montgomery’s theoretical approach to Africana literature is the proposition to literary critics to use the distinctness of African-American culture as a drinking gourd, to refresh and renew the ways in which traditions and literature of the African-American community (and ultimately African-American homes) are understood.

In some African-American homes, quilts are a physical symbol of family and culture. Quilt making is a skill that is often taught orally and by demonstration, from one generation to another. The finished product reflects a picture of insight into both a
specific family and African-American culture, for in truth, they are coded, material representations of language and traditions. Thinking of the theory translated to criticism, the foundational components of Archetypes and African-American Literary Criticism act as the batting to the quilt of literary analysis. In this dissertation, the picturesque, culturally explicit story that will be told in the panels of the figurative quilt are that of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and her opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman.

The matriarch, Big Mama, is an African-American Archetype from the African-American family, which calls forth a powerful image. Just the two words Big Mama image the picture of maternal perfection to many African Americans. She is the exemplar archetype for this dissertation because Big Mama is the woman whom nearly all African-American mothers, whether consciously or unconsciously, strive to be. The mammoth of importance of her matriarchy harkens back to West African matriarchal practices and reverence, as we will see in the criticism to follow. Additionally, the common practice of separating mother and child during slavery made the African-American mother in a post-antebellum society devoted to her children in an almost supernatural manner. It was only then that her children were finally “hers” to own, to cleave to her breast, and to love.

Certainly, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s persistence in the folklore calls into question whether or not she is more myth than a reality with respect to the African-American community, a question worth bringing into the fold for the sake of her future progeny. In literature, unlike real life, there truly is reason for such mythic placement and by “fluffing the quilt,” the critic will uncover meaning and purpose for why the matriarch of the African-American family behaves and is perceived in such a way. More importantly, it opens up the discussion as to how this perception is distinctly African-American and how the phenomenon might offer cultural insight with respect to
the lives of African Americans. What is covered, can and will be (eventually) uncovered.

Or, as the author’s own Big Mama used to say, “What’s done in the dark will eventually come to light.” Appropriately, it is with Big Mama, in her purest form, that the application of the Theory of African-American Archetypes in literary criticism ensues.
CHAPTER 2:

THE BIG MAMA PANEL:

BIG MAMA (PROPER) IN GLORIA NAYLOR’S MAMA DAY

The African-American Archetypal Big Mama character exists in the collective unconscious of many African Americans because she is a conglomeration of Africana folklore. There are five definitive characteristics of this character, which are as follows: her “big”-ness, her spirituality (which makes her a powerful healer and punisher), her synonymy with Soul Food, her “Mama”-isms (or unparalleled wisdom) and her solitude.

As art imitates life, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama corresponds with heroines found in many novels by and for African Americans, such as “Eva” in Toni Morrison’s Sula, “Mama” in Terry McMillan’s Mama, each of the daughters, in their own special way, and their “Mama” in Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo by Ntozake Shange, “Anyanwu” in Octavia Butler’s Wild Seed, and “Mattie” in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place. Mama Day, also by Gloria Naylor, is the novel chosen to demonstrate the Theory of African-American Archetypes, as the protagonist Mama Day most cohesively meshes with the Definitive Characteristics of the theoretical African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Mama Day, or Miranda, exemplifies the African-American Archetypal Big Mama in her purest form. She is the voice and heart of the small island community of Willow Springs, located neither in South Carolina nor Georgia, but in its own special place somewhere in between the two. Mama Day both literally and metaphysically gives life to most of the people on the island, with her ancient mix of magic, tradition, and reverence for the past.

Mama Day’s significance and her “big”-ness with respect to the people of Willow
Springs are immeasurable. However, her monumental place within the community can be traced to the importance of motherhood as an inheritance of Africana lore. In many traditional West African/Yoruba societies, from which most African Americans can trace their lineage, “Mother is supreme,” as one popular proverb proclaims. A mother’s devotion to her children may be equated with the vastness of the ocean, the largest container of life on the planet. In truth, the all-encompassing mother deity of the Yoruba is Yemonja, or the goddess of the seas. She is the “personification of motherhood. As a deity of the ocean, the largest environment for life on earth, Yemonja is [...] seen as the cradle for life, with her tides representing her motherly effort to rock the cradle of the children who live in her womb” (Bess-Montgomery 109). Other motherly deities of the water, of the Ifa tradition, are Oshun, beautiful warrior deity of the water, and Oya, whirlwind goddess who presides over the river Niger (Thompson 84; Ellis 63). These riverain spirits serve the purpose of protection over their children. There is also the water deity Mami Water, who is a motherly spirit of the water, sacred to many West Africans because of her association with female fertility and her power to dispense wealth to her followers. All of these African mother water deities are saviors of sorts and can give as well as take; mostly, they only detract from or punish their followers when their human arrogance or self-pride gets the better of them, as many mothers are wont to do (Thompson 75). However, their primary aim is to create and sustain life. These powerful energies of the water serve as the folkloric fibers to the panel piece of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama -- the irrefutable voice of love, justice and “big”-ness amongst her people.

While this connection to Africa is relatable here, many African Americans who revere the “big”-ness of Big Mama are unaware of these deities, let alone their powers.
Yet, one must remain cognizant of the fact that simply because Africans were dislodged from Africa, their cultural preferences and subsequent beliefs survived generationally through the lore. Although African mothers were displaced from their children during the Maafa and following that slavery, reverence for African motherhood survived, even if specific deific names escaped the minds of the practitioners of this belief system. Even the horrible practice of separating families could not separate many Africans from their beliefs about motherhood; if anything, it was valued even more because in America motherhood was not a right for African mothers. If, by chance, these mothers were allowed to be a presence in the lives of their children, it was an extreme privilege and/or a shaky promise at best. Perhaps as a result of motherhood being denied to so many African women, it became even more hallowed within the community.

Further, reverence for what the African mother water deities represented, with respect to motherhood, remained intact. Perchance it was to these mothers that first African mothers petitioned for relief during the Maafa; perchance it was home to these mothers of the water that many Africans returned, in committing suicide during the unbearable passage over the seas.

In post-antebellum society, the African mother often rekindled an unbreakable bond and relationship with her children, with the similar goal of the water deities, which was to ensure the survival of her progeny and counter evil or persons who sought to destroy them. Here, evil incarnate would have been White racists whose hatred permeated and substantially affected the physical, mental, and financial realities of Africans in America. Big Mama’s “big”-ness, like her matriarchal deity forebears, was a cooling balm to soothe the scathing nature of race relations in America.

While this super-matriarchy is often mistaken for a reaction to slavery, knowledge
of the African deities that existed and survived, via folklore, tells a deeper story.

American slavery impacted Africana peoples on myriad levels; of this there can be little dispute. Yet, the institution of slavery was unsuccessful in completely obliterating many Africana beliefs, including the omnipotent mother within the Africana worldview. The mother’s implicit, limitless worth to the community did survive; her “big”-ness survived. This Africanism dissolved into the complexity of life in the Americas, which morphed into the African-American Archetypal Big Mama in the African-American community. Perhaps this is why Zora Neale Hurston, mother of African-American Folklore, referred to the water as her true home: “I have found that my real home is in the water, that the earth is only my step-mother. My old man, the Sun, sired me out of the sea” (Hurston 795). As an initiate of Vodun, Hurston was aware of the matriarchal African water goddesses who represented motherhood; her statement evidences their impact and contribution to the culture and the lore passed down from generation to generation. Thus, if sired from the sea, then Big Mama is to be found at home in the water. Here, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s inheritance is a sweet presence that lulls and soothes her children as well as sustains them, much like the water. Such calm and such love is as boundless as those waters; it is the “big”-ness of Big Mama.

Therefore, while Big Mama may or may not be physically a big woman, this African-American Archetype is an absolute colossus with respect to her importance to both her own family and the surrounding community. Mama Day of Willow Springs is such a woman, as the all-encompassing spirit of the people of Willow Springs. When real estate developers hungrily come to the island in search of vacation land for their own financial aggrandizement, Mama Day refuses to relinquish what she knows is rightfully owned by the islanders; she has the wisdom and the foresight to see that the land belongs
to the people alone, and that any concession, however small, would strip the inhabitants of their rights and ties to Willow Springs in total. Mama Day has seen such abuse before, and as Big Mama, she will use her “big”-ness to protect those who seek to destroy her children, synonymous with her community:

Got them folks’ land, built fences around it first thing, and then brought in all the builders and high-paid managers from mainside—ain’t nobody on them islands benefited. And the only dark faces you see now in them ‘vacation paradises’ is the ones cleaning toilets and cutting the grass. On their own land, mind you, their own land. Weren’t gonna happen in Willow Springs. ‘Cause if Mama Day say no, everybody say no.

(Naylor 6)

Indeed, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, here as Mama Day, can see right through the hearts of people and their intentions, good or evil. Big Mamas such as Mama Day have an innate distrust for Whites; using the past as her predictor for the future, she wields her reach in the community to wash the “evil” away as the tides of the ocean. She counters any would-be molesters of her children, in this case, the Whites who wanted to lay claim to the beautiful island of Willow Springs. In her mind, she knows that developers would take more than just land; they would also destroy the lives and the livelihoods of the people of Willow Springs. Mama Day will not have it. Yet, the “big”-ness of Big Mama lies not only in her discernment of evil from without but also within.

Mama has supreme judgment, a third eye of sorts, for those in her family and community. For example, Mama Day is able to reassure Bernice that her husband, Ambush, is an honorable man, despite any unfounded suspicions of infidelity that Bernice might have. Mama Day is the cooling element, like water, calming Bernice’s
fears. Washing over her like soothing waves of the ocean, she convinces Bernice that Ambush would not leave her simply because Bernice is having problems becoming pregnant: “Any man—and I say, any man—who would leave you just because of something like that is well worth the going. And I’ve known Ambush before he knew himself—I brought his mama into the world—and he ain’t that kind of man. So if that’s what’s on your mind, lay it to rest” (43). Where Ambush’s outward and inward protestations of love tell Bernice the same thing, it is entirely different coming from the unquestionable “big”-ness of the Big Mama voice of authority in Mama Day.

Similarly, the entire community accepts Cocoa’s husband George, sight unseen, simply because of Mama Day’s verbal approval of him: “Whatever the boy is into, Mama Day says he’s alright. And you know, they don’t make enough wool—even up in New York—to pull anything over her eyes” (132-133). Her “big”-ness means that whatever she says is law; she is not to be questioned as the mother of all living things, the protector and purveyor of her people. Inasmuch as one can count on the ocean to undergo both high and low tides, one can count on the experience of this African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s judgment to distinguish between good and evil.

As the city boy who grew up without a mother, let alone an African-American Archetypal Big Mama, Mama Day’s immense importance to Willow Springs is foreign to George. He must learn that her magnanimity to the community does not correlate with her size; she does not have to be a big mama in order to act in the African-American Archetypal role of Big Mama. In fact, when George meets Mama Day for the first time, he is amazed at her petiteness: “And then there was the little one: I don’t know why I thought your Mama Day would be a big, tall woman. From the stories you told about your clashes with her, she had loomed that way in my mind. Hard. Strong” (175-176).
Truly, her colossal importance eclipses her actual dimensions. However, as an African-American man versed in the power of African-American Archetypal Big Mamas, George must undergo several lessons in order to come to the realization of Mama Day’s “big”-ness.

First, after taking George on a journey across the island that threatens to break his fragile heart, Mama Day barely breaks a sweat. He is also duped into believing that his help is needed around her house when Mama Day simply wants to keep him occupied and out of trouble. Cocoa, her great niece and George’s wife, admiringly ponders on Mama Day’s craft: “When she puts her mind to it, no one can beat a southern woman at manipulating a man. [...]she] wove the illusion that you were doing more than helping, you were in charge. [...]it’s what you believed that counted” (216-217). Of course, George is unaware of Mama Day’s ability to deceive him; she is so “big” that convincing a man, sans his knowledge, is a walk in the park (or, in the case of Mama Day, a walk across the island) for her. Finally, when George succumbs to Mama Day’s “big”-ness, it is in desperation for his wife’s life. Unfortunately, it is too late for him to truly accept her significance. Perhaps his hard earned lesson is a nod from Gloria Naylor about the dangers of human arrogance and disbelief; for Yemonja and other riverain goddesses of the Yoruba tradition, this is a quality for which one must be punished. Refusing to acknowledge the “big”-ness of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, in his dogged preference to things he can explain, George pays the ultimate price of his own life. George’s death, as his disbelief, is as murky and unexplainable as the depths of the ocean of which African mother water deities reside.

Despite the tragedy of George’s death, Mama Day forgive him for his ignorance, as exalted ones oftentimes do. After all, forgiveness is only one of the spiritual gifts of Big
Mama. In fact, her spirituality is yet another indicator of this African-American Archetype; it is one of the Definitive Characteristics of Big Mama. One of the most diabolical cruelties of American slavery was the deliberate separation of tribes, with the goal of breaking both relational and spiritual connections between Africans. Forcing Westernized religion onto Africans who had an extant sense of spirituality was a brilliantly cruel tactic to create division. Unfortunately, it was also an effective strategy: "The biggest crime of Christianity, as far as African people are concerned, has been the desacrilization of the African spiritual space, that is of African Life, given the paramount importance of spirituality for African people" (Mamaza 223). However, all was not lost; in fact, quite a bit more has survived that even many African Americans would originally believe. Where the precise rituals of African spirituality may have been disassembled, to a certain extent, African spirituality, in its ethereal form, was (and still is) expressed in many Africana peoples.

Generally speaking, what re-emerged in the African-American religious tradition was a syncretism of African spirituality and Christianity, which was orally transmitted and/or manifested in such Africana practices in the African-American church as call and response, spirituals, and grandiose sermons (all elements of Africana lore): "the affinity of great cultural traits from Africa, [which] caused a joining in all that would be essential; it did not cause the various cultic nuances to be leveled nor was the originality of each group’s conceptions rubbed out. What happened was that many factors came together to form a common vision" (Pierre 27). Further, as Bess Montgomery points out, "People may not well accept that beliefs they have come to think of as Christian may in fact owe a great deal to the cultural specificity of their Christian practice to African traditional religions" (187). While overt African rituals and religious traditions were discouraged
and seemingly supplanted, Africana spirituality, which is timeless, was never truly left behind on the continent of Africa. Geneva Smitherman summarizes the matter thusly:

"Yes, enslaved Africans adopted ole massa’s religion, but they Africanized this religion into spirit-gittin, tongue-speakin, vision-receivin, amen-sayin, singsong-preachin, holy-dancin worship" (21). As the author’s mother, a “preaching woman” would say, “Can I get an amen?”

Bess Montgomery’s definition of spirituality as an inherent quality among Africana peoples is especially relevant with respect to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama: “Spirituality emphasizes the intimate and inherent connection between all living and nonliving things and stresses the essentialness of balance and reciprocity and has at its core the belief that good character creates cosmic harmony, between and within the spiritual and physical plane, and immorality effectuates disharmony and ruptures the individual and/or communal psyche” (200). Here, the definition delineates African spirituality from the traditional western point of view, validating this Definitive Characteristic of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Whereas the Africana spiritual world view supports the focus of mutual and collective progress and reciprocity with the universe, the Western worldview supports the individual’s potential and primary responsibility (and subsequent power) of self.

While Bess Montgomery’s definition refers to Yoruba religious practices in use in the past, present, and future, it also corresponds to African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s unwavering, unyielding sense of balance and respect for life, or spirituality, which is also enduring. Whether or not a person is a practitioner of the Ifa religion is of no consequence to the definition’s significance to the archetype because the primary qualifier of Africana spirituality is balance. In other words, one should maintain good
character, or recognition and respect for all nature and the universe, people living in this world, and ancestors in the next. This belief, a quality specific to many West and Central African traditions, was not lost. After thousands of years of cultural continuity, even the dehumanization of slavery could not obliterate spirit and the subsequent desire to maintain balance. For this reason, African mothers in bondage, forebears of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, could endure such heart-wrenching tasks such as wet nurse or cook; as the caretakers of other’s lives, their sense of the spirit was forcibly tested and subsequently strengthened by their beliefs regarding spiritual equilibrium and reciprocity.

Truly, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s sense of spirituality is connected with her designation of simply “doing” for others. As one so concerned with the lives of those who depend upon her, Big Mama is a healer of sorts:

African-American healing is rooted in belief and thus is a religious act, which places folk practitioners and their art in the world of the spiritual. In some instances the healer is likened to a preacher or [...] the priest and medicine man, a major support system for enslaved Africans transported to the West. Beliefs that were sacred within the world view of enslaved Africans could be validated and amalgamated with their Christian religious worship. (Robinson 365)

Big Mama is such a priest/ medicine woman; with ancient spirituality and New World Christianity, she is able to affect the lives of her loved ones in a mighty spiritual manner. Primarily, Big Mama is a magical healer of hearts and souls, particularly those of other women in her family and community. In fact, in matters of the heart especially, she is often a modern conjurer of sorts.
Very loosely speaking, conjure, obeah or hoodoo can be defined as affecting some sort of change by invoking a desire via the connectedness to spirit. This spiritual link may be made manifest through magic and/or powerful prayers. Origins of conjure can be traced back to religious practices of, again, the Yoruba people of West Africa: “The power of the Conjure Doctor, like that of anyone with double sight (unusual powers, such as the ability to see ghosts), is believed to stem from the fact that [s]he was born with a caul (preferably seven caulds) over his[her] face, and perhaps, that [s]he is the seventh son of a seventh son” (Dance 554). Mama Day, in particular, is a very spiritual, a magical conjurer because she is the direct descendant of the first mother of the island, Sapphira Wade, a miraculously legendary woman: “Nobody was gonna trifle with Mama Day […] her being the direct descendant of Sapphira Wade, piled on top the fact of springing from the seventh son of a seventh son” (Naylor 6). As Bess-Montgomery points out, the number seven is significant and not to be overlooked because it “[...] symbolizes completeness in the Judeo-Christian tradition and spiritual transformation in traditional African religion” (138). With this in mind, Mama Day is destined to be spiritually powerful because her bloodline combines a robust African sense of spirituality with a dose of conjuration abilities, or the ability to transform and change. Robinson writes, “Folk beliefs have traditionally consisted of the religiomagical practices of African Americans, […] many of these practices were African in origin” (364). While such “reliquomagical practices” are viable and indicative of Mama Day, to a degree, it must be noted that conjure is not a prerequisite for the Definitive Characteristic of Spirituality, with respect to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. However, the strong sense for spirituality is. Whether Big Mama is using forces of magic/obeah/hoodoo or the forces of prayer, she is connected to the greater life force that allows her to affect change
for those she loves and for those who would dare to cross her or her children. More importantly, this connection to the higher power, or spirit, is almost always extremely effective.

Inasmuch as this spirituality allowed Africana people to overcome what is arguably the greatest holocaust in human history, it would also help to defeat the difficulties of everyday life for Big Mama and her children. Mama Day is a special case because of her blending of spirit and magic. For this reason, most all of the residents of Willow Springs entrust her with their lives when the troubles of life become too difficult. With a “little dose of nothing but mother wit with a lot of hocus pocus,” Mama Day is able to help to prepare Bernice’s body in her desire to become pregnant (Naylor 97). First, Mama Day consults with nature itself to see if her advice for Bernice will be applicable; she is so in tune with all facets of life around her, in and around the island, as her spirituality dictates, that she can tell if new life is brewing for Bernice and Ambush. She is able to see into the future, on the couple’s behalf, by divining the yolks of eggs or seeds of life: “Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bloated yellow swims in the thick mucous—not this month. She breaks another egg—nor the next. The third yolk is slipped into the sugar and butter—nor the next. She shakes her head. But she would still make up the ground raspberry for Bernice—tones the insides, strengthens the blood” (44). Even though the answer may not bode well for Bernice immediately, in true African-American Archetypal Big Mama form, Mama Day continues to spiritually petition for her, hoping that Bernice will listen to her advice about letting nature have its way.

Unfortunately, Bernice is a bit impatient; instead of listening to the guiding all-knowing spirit in Mama Day, she opts for the scientific route of fertility pills. The
artificial quality of these pills (a simultaneous rejection of spirit) causes Bernice to become violently ill. Knowing she has made a mistake in trusting a synthetic answer instead of a spiritual one, Bernice, wracked with pain, sends Ambush off to retrieve Mama Day. She sends for her true help, calling out to the one who can really help her when she is down, much like worshippers call out to for those that can “get a prayer through” when they have exhausted their own human means of solving a problem.

Although she is disgusted at first, Mama Day, the spiritual healer, answers Bernice’s call; upon her arrival she must ascertain the seriousness of Bernice’s injury before she can restore her to health: “

Miranda [Mama Day] slides her fingers up into Bernice real gentle. Them wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. A path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman’s cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon. (75)

Mama Day’s adeptness with the female body is so proficient, so precise that even the formally trained doctor from “across the water,” Dr. Smithfield, acknowledges and trusts her diagnosis and treatment. Mama Day both analyzes the patient and is able to assuage Bernice’s pain due to her knowledge of the plants around her, yet her spirituality and its placement among the people of the island is still often misunderstood by persons unacquainted with her sacred acumen.

Despite Dr. Smithfield’s misgivings about Mama Day’s magic, he must stand back in awe for her medical precision: “Being an outsider, he couldn’t be expected to believe the other things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another one
when he saw her” (84). Dr. Smithfield agrees with both the diagnosis and the treatment for Bernice at the behest of Mama Day, but not with the reason why Bernice became ill in the first place—essentially her unauthorized ingestion of fertility pills: “Good God—Perganol. How in the high holy hell did she get her hands on these? [...] of all the things she coulda done, this is about the worst. I wouldn’t even give Bernice Clomid—and that’s a lot less potent. How long has she been taking this?” (85). Mama Day protects Bernice from an imminent arrest stemming from her taking the pills sans prescription or permission. Mama Day is able to convince Dr. Smithfield of the desperation of Bernice’s situation and distract him from turning Bernice into the authorities for her actions: “The point, Dr. Smithfield, is that it don’t matter how she got ‘em—she got ‘em. And we needed you here to find out exactly what kind of damage she done to her system” (85). Bernice, like most of the children on the island, is Mama Day’s child, so she does her best to protect her from harm. This strong, spiritual connection and relationship is why Mama Day is so vigilant in taking care of Bernice’s body when she is down, bringing her back from the brink of possible self-induced sterilization and/or death, as well as why she makes supplication on behalf of Bernice’s freedom for her “criminal” act of desperately wanting a baby.

Mama Day forgives Bernice for going against her advice, and she is ultimately spiritually instrumental in securing a pregnancy and a child for her. After dispensing useful advice to Bernice for months, in preparation for her pregnancy, Mama Day performs a secret, sacred ritual, which joins life to life. Before the meeting, Mama Day wonders, “[...] would God forgive her for Bernice? But she wasn’t changing the natural course of nothing, she couldn’t if she tried. Just using what’s there” (139). Mama Day finally decides that the encounter will be worth her while because first and foremost she
acknowledges her insignificance in the face of the Almighty and the universe; in this humble service to spirituality, she is able to help invoke the power of new life for Bernice. As a powerful spiritual healer, the extraordinary meeting enables Bernice to become a mother: “Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing alive—wet—the egg moves form one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight” (140).

Here, in what is possibly a hallowed ancient ritual, Mama Day brings seed to seed, in effect transferring the power and the possibility of new life to Bernice’s womb. While the meeting of the two women may be a bit misunderstood in that the it does not follow along mainstream archetypal ideas regarding fertility and birth, what is clear is that the African-American Archetypal Big Mama in Mama Day uses what she knows about women, physically and, perhaps more importantly, spiritually, in order to heal Bernice’s womb and bless it with life.

Mama Day concerns herself with Bernice’s well being because she brought both her and her husband Ambush into the world; they are her children. Despite the fact that she has never given birth herself, Mama Day is still “everybody’s mama” (89). Thus Cocoa, her great niece, is also her child, and she takes special care to see that Cocoa, too, is not hurt in any way. The family connection is a simultaneous spiritual connection; she reverences both the living and the dead who share her bloodline.

The Candle Walk tradition is a vestige of such reverence to Mama Day’s ancestors. During the Candle Walk, a custom specific to Willow Springs, people of the island walk along the roads on the 22nd of December with candles and give gifts to all of their neighbors. They greet and lead each other with the pronouncement, “Lead on with light” (108-110). According to legend, this tradition is based off of the actions of the first
mother of the island, Sapphira Wade. Depending upon who is telling the story, the Candle Walk tradition is derived from a conversation between Sapphira, the world’s greatest conjure woman, and God:

The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. ‘Leave ‘em here, Lord,’ she said. ‘I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light.’

(110)

As with all epics, the meaning and the significance of that “light” that the people of Willow Springs are to “lead on with” has changed. For, in recent years, instead of walking with candles, some opt to drive or hold flashlights; instead of giving homemade sweets or wares, people give away store bought gifts for Candle Walk. These modifications of the custom is not bothersome to Mama Day because she is conscious that the sentiment of the tradition is still there, despite the fact that the story, human movements, and motivations have changed:

My daddy said that when he was young, Candle Walk was different still. It weren’t about no candles, it was about a light that burned in a man’s heart. And folks would go out and look up at the stars—they figured his spirit had to be there, it was the highest place they knew. And what took him that high was his belief in right, while what buried him was the lingering taste of ginger from the lips of a woman. (308)

The name of that woman is lost to Mama Day, but her spirit is not; Sapphira Wade lives on in her. Because of her deep sense of spirituality, the lost ones are never truly lost.
Mama Day is less concerned with how things are physically conducted and more concerned with the continuity of human interactions; so long as the sentiment and the feelings remain intact, the dearly departed living and those not yet born will have a bond with the heart and soul of the island of Willow Springs—its people.

With Mama Day’s strong sense of spirit, she knows that her family members are all on different planes of being, but they are all parts of the same universe nonetheless. For this reason, Mama Day places moss in her shoes whenever she walks through the graveyard of the Days out of respect for her loved ones who are departed in body, but not in spirit: “They near the graveyard within the circle of live oaks and move down into time. A bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot and they’re among the beginning of Days” (150). In fact, she still speaks with them regularly, expecting and receiving answers, often revealed to her through nature. As she still loves and respects the dead, she similarly protects the living. Thus, Mama Day will not allow Cocoa to be taken physically, mentally, or spiritually. Like all of her children, she has protected Cocoa all of her life. While in she is high school, Mama Day threatens Cocoa’s high school principal, who is known for being sexually inappropriate with his students. After the principal goes after her “Baby Girl,” Cocoa, Mama Day publicly announces to him that he should keep his hands off of Cocoa. To make the message stick, she leans over, whispering in his ear, informing him that she “[...] could fix it so the only thing he’d be able to whip out of his pants for the rest of his life would be pocket change” (68). Her “big”-ness is enough for the principal to get the message; her spiritual power of healer has an opposite side of punisher, of which the man is keenly aware. In light of that knowledge, he leaves Cocoa alone.

Later in Cocoa’s life, the person who goes after the “Baby Girl” is far more
sinister and thus far more serious because she, too, has conjuring powers. Mama Day must use her spiritual power of punisher to counter the evil in the character Ruby as Ruby seeks to destroy Cocoa’s life. Ruby is a jealous woman who dabbles in magic derived from her limited but powerful knowledge of roots and conjures. She is the major threat to Cocoa’s life because she has been known to use her form of magic for evil; Mama Day suspects her of murdering two people who previously crossed her. In fact, even before Mama Day’s own sister Abigail is willing to admit to the mysterious nature of the deaths of Ruby’s enemies, Mama Day senses darkness in Ruby because of her own spiritual prowess.

Such recognition of malevolence is within reach of Mama Day because she willingly accepts her own inimicality within the span of the universe: “Abigail, stop your foolishness. All God got in mind is to send you a hurricane? It ain’t got nothing to do with us, we just bystanders on this earth. Sometimes I think we was only a second thought—and a poor second thought at that” (228). Again, she recognizes that human beings are simply a small part of the universe, not the center of it. As such, they can only watch and learn from it and when needed petition the universe on behalf of their human needs. Yet, once a person like Ruby attempts to shift the universe for her own selfish reasons, as an insignificant human speck, the disrespect to the universe speaks volumes and must reverberate back to her in divine, ruthless retribution. Mama Day knows that Ruby’s plan is dangerous because her chief goal is to do an innocent Cocoa harm: “Ain’t no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate” (157). However, love is even stronger, especially when speaking of the limitless love of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. As the opposite of Ruby’s arrogance, Mama Day acts as the universe’s vessel of vengeance against Ruby’s overconfidence. Thus, Mama Day’s spiritual powers of
conjuration are supreme and greater than any forces of evil; her spiritual nature of
harmony and goodwill towards the universe works on her behalf when she is threatened.
When tested, therefore, she may offer swift and precise recompense, in keeping with that
spiritual harmony.

What Mama Day senses, in fact, is the spiritual imbalance in Ruby. Just as Mama
Day can look at the behavior of the animals and predict a huge thunderstorm, Mama Day
can look through Ruby spiritually and see her cruel intentions. Even though Mama Day
swears that she “don’t truck with that stuff” (90) and that she “ain’t in the business of
miracles,” (239) she can be pushed into using her powers to restore balance and to restore
life when challenged by evil in Ruby.

When Ruby’s husband, Junior, makes a pass at Cocoa at a party, he pleads his
case to Ruby by blaming Cocoa for his weakness. Ruby disguises her plan for retribution
with apologies for her husband’s behavior and invites Cocoa to her home so that she can
braid her hair. In a fit of jealous rage, Ruby poisons Cocoa’s scalp, mind and body, for
that matter, with a powerful herb. Nightshade, a poisonous enough plant on its own, is
mixed in with the hair grease that Ruby places on Cocoa’s scalp as she combs and plaits
her hair with white ribbons. Unbeknownst to Cocoa, there is also conjure coupled with
the poison in Ruby’s deceptive conversation and actions. This deadly combination nearly
causes Cocoa to die as the poison seeps into her scalp, mingling with her brain and body
until she becomes a skeleton of her former self, both physically and mentally.

Unfortunately for her, Ruby clearly underestimates the spiritual power of Mama Day.
Mama Day ruminates on the matter: “This all boiled down to one thing: it was a fool at
work. Fool enough over some man to even think of messing with what was hers, or fool
enough to believe that she was too old to do anything about it. […] But before I’d let you
mess with mine, I'd wrap you up in tissue paper and send you straight to hell” (173). Ruby’s behavior, therefore, must not go without a hefty discipline. Again, such blatant human arrogance must be punished. For threatening the life of her young, Mama Day must conjure up powerful magic against Ruby for “messing with [hers]” (170). After calling out to Ruby three times, in effect mimicking an African drum of spirituality, seeking balance by chanting her name “like a mantra [of protection]” (Bess Montgomery 77), Mama Day places a silvery powder around Ruby’s house. The thundering of Mama Day’s cane on her door, as she calls out to Ruby, foreshadows Ruby’s coming fate:

The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. Miranda [Mama Day] stands there, out of breath, with little beads of sweat on her temples […] [Ruby’s] door don’t open when [Mama Day] leaves, and the wind don’t stir the circle of silvery powder. (Naylor 270)

Leaving Ruby’s home, Mama Day must continue on a spiritual journey to seal Ruby’s spiritual reprisal for evil. After making her way directionally around the island, Mama Day ends her journey at the “other place,” as it is her physical and spiritual source of her magical strength. It is the place where she met Bernice for their encounter on behalf of life, and it is the place where she must commune with spirit to counter death, which threatens her “Baby Girl’s” life.

The “other place” is where Mama Day and her American born ancestors took their first breaths; it is the symbolic, spiritual beginning of the Days. Indeed, it is the home of the first Day, the “true conjure woman” and mother of the island—Sapphira Wade—the woman who was a slave in body, but not in her mind: “She could walk
through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot [...] she turned the moon to salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (5). It is this woman, this spiritual stock, which is housed in the “other place;” Sapphira’s spirit and her power are the reasons why Mama Day must return there.

On the way to the “other place,” Mama Day warns men rebuilding the bridge to the mainland that a powerful lightning storm is soon to come; because of her “big”-ness, they take her word for it and leave their work undone. They have seen for themselves in the present what Mama Day can do with lightning; they witnessed her conjuring up a lightning storm to punish a White sheriff, an outsider, for disrespecting a young man named Parris. He made the mistake of calling Parris “Nigger” and the bigger mistake of underestimating and disrespecting Mama Day. She tells the young White sheriff that he will live, only to “address [Parris] proper” (80). Stranded on the island, the White man is alive but very much alone. In the dark of night, a lightning storm, from seemingly nowhere, dances all around him threateningly, each streak powerful enough to take his life. While the man survives the most frightening storm of his life and is physically unscathed, he is forever changed by the encounter with Mama Day who called up the storm. Luckily for him, it is only his pride that is hurt.

Ruby, however, is not so lucky; she forgets both the “big”-ness and the supreme spirituality that Mama Day possesses. She does not escape the wrath of this African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s judgment; Mama Day’s spiritual power sets Ruby’s evil in its rightful place: “Miranda climbs the verandah steps and enters the front door of the other place. She closes it securely behind her. The lightning is flashing in the clouds.
It dances around that silver trailer, but it hits mostly along the edges of the forests, scarring a pine or two. It hits the bridge, though, taking out the new tarred boards and a day's worth of work. It hits Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes" (272-273). Evil has no way of escaping justice when the powerful spirit administering that medicine is the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, an entity with a matchless sense of spirit able to invoke the necessary energies of the universe to her ends of reciprocity and balance.

Just as Mama Day can call up the recipe of a lightning storm as a reprisal for wickedness, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama can also call up recipes to fill the soul. For this, Big Mama is synonymous with Soul Food, another of her Definitive Characteristics. In a legendary fashion, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama's fantastic culinary fare also feeds the soul. Filling much more than the bellies of her willing subjects, she simultaneously fills their cores to capacity with her boundless love and knowledge.

Soul food was formed as a combination of African cuisine, restructured to fit the lives and food sources of African Americans during slavery. As in Africa, meals were often prepared over an open fire, typically in one pot, for this is all that the slaves had access to, more often than not, for their personal cooking. Yams (sweet potatoes), watermelon, legumes and beans, okra and grains were food sources in Africa, which some African Americans continued to eat in slavery, as well as wild game such as deer, rabbits, squirrels, birds, and opossums (Dance 424). Most Africans, from whom African Americans descended, were largely vegetarian; the same could be said of African Americans in slavery. Yet, this was not so much an option as it was a byproduct of the societal condition of the people (424).
In any case, choices for food during slavery were very limited; obviously, whatever the masters did not eat, the slaves did. With the castoffs from their dinner tables, slaves were able to create dishes that are still eaten and shared in many modern African-American families. Recipes were passed down, most often among the women of families, who were acting as African-American Archetypal Big Mamas of the families, in order to prepare meals that families could share and enjoy together. For example, from the discards from the pig, came chitterlings, pigs’ feet, and tripe, which many members of the author’s family still enjoy. Similarly, catfish, a scavenger fish often rejected by antebellum masters, is a past, present and (conceivably) future fried food favorite in many African-American families. Fruit cobblers, which can be made from overripe fruit, were and are a staple dessert in many African-American homes. It would be irresponsible to suggest that only the scant dishes mentioned here comprise the whole of Soul Food, not only because Soul Food involves much more than physical food, but also because African Americans eventually gained greater access to food choices after slavery. Additionally, many African Americans do not eat soul food; African-American Muslims do not eat pork, for example. As Dance aptly notes, “Like the spirituals, blues, and Black dialect, soul food is also something that aspiring Blacks often leave behind as they move into the larger community. Finally, because the food is so high in fat and cholesterol, many health-conscious Blacks either avoid it or modify the way it is traditionally prepared” (425). Despite the fact that tastes and preferences may have changed in some African-American families, what remains is the love for gathering together and sharing life over a table of fabulous foods, resulting from ancient recipes bequeathed as a familial and cultural inheritance. For truly, those recipes, preserved through the lore, intermingled with the love of the women preparing the meals who were, more often than not, acting in
the role of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. This amalgamation of food, love, and generational legacy is at the heart and soul of Soul Food, which is why Big Mama is synonymous with the term in the African-American community.

Mama Day, as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, is also synonymous with Soul Food. When readers first meet her, she is in the kitchen preparing tea for herself (Naylor 34). It is should be noted that for herself, this mediocrity is enough to satisfy her; in fact, it is not even true sustenance, as it is just a liquid. Tea, alone, would be absolutely unacceptable for her to serve to her loved ones, despite the tenderness of the freshly picked leaves or the sweetness of the fresh honey used to make it. Yet, when cooking for others, the most delicious, non-calorie friendly meals come into the fold. When Mama Day simply discerns that Cocoa is on her way home, without confirmation from Cocoa, she and her sister Abigail get busy cooking for their “Baby Girl.” Abigail bargains with Miranda over who will make what foods and desserts in order to “fatten” Cocoa up: “Listen, bring me over a batch of that dried rosemary [...] to season this pork shoulder—Baby Girl loves herself some roast pork. And a good half-dozen eggs—I’ll do up one jelly and one coconut cake. We only got two weeks to fatten her up—know she gonna come draggin’ in here puny as the law allows—‘less you wanna make the jelly and I’ll do two coconuts. Your jelly cakes always turn out better than mine” (37). The sisters must load Cocoa up with Soul Food as they are convinced that her lack of curves is paramount in her failure to secure a man, marriage consequentially, and children. As the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, it is important to fill Cocoa’s body to its maximum while she is in Willow Springs, and fill her mind with advice on securing lasting love. The importance placed upon a young woman’s frame is, in actuality, an
Africanism. For, among the Anang Ibibio (Nigeria), there are fattening houses for young women, preparing them to be suitable for marriage.

Therefore, Cocoa is neither the first nor the last young Africana woman to be accused of being too thin; additionally, she is not the only young woman from Willow Springs who must defer to the Soul Food specialty of Mama Day as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Preparing Bernice for the task of motherhood means that Mama Day must help her to clean up her act with respect to her poor job of cooking. If she is to be an effective mother, then her non-habits of cooking must be revamped:

“There’s a plate of cold chicken in the icebox and she nibbles on a wing—Bernice sure ain’t much of a cook. And look at the mess up in this freezer—frozen pizzas, Sara Lees. And a cabinet full of canned soup, pork and beans, Jiffy cornbread mix” (83). For the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, packaged meals are little more than packaged poison for the body and soul.

During the most difficult time of Bernice’s life, when Bernice believes that she is pregnant and losing her baby, her fears are compounded by that fact that she also believes she is prepared for motherhood. However, even though she has a nursery completely decorated and ready for its sweet little occupant, Bernice is not ready to become a mother. Mama Day’s diagnosis is that Bernice’s pregnancy is false as is her preparedness to become a mother because of her lack of cooking skills. However, once Mama Day takes her under her wing, Bernice becomes more adept at cooking and thus better prepared to become a mother. Bernice also becomes a gardener, which gives her greater access to fresher food, which will nourish her both physically and spiritually. In fact, during Candle Walk, members of the community are quite impressed with Bernice’s new baking prowess: “Ain’t tasted gingerbread like that since Mama used to churn butter. […]"
Coulda sworn there was fresh ground nutmeg in it, and real blackstrap molasses. Kinda gives you hope for this new generation, don’t it?” (112). It is only after months of honing her skills of growing and cooking real and wholesome food that Bernice becomes mother material. Her tutelage at the feet of Soul Food walking in the personage of Mama Day is the source of her new gift for cooking.

Mothering is a science that involves cooking to a great extent; for Big Mamas, it is how their mothering is often measured. In Mama Day’s view, a well-fed family is a happy family; families in trouble have meager fixings on the dinner table. Such is the case with Carmen Rae, a young mother who comes to Mama Day in desperation for her baby’s life. She has failed to care for him properly, and he is suffering from a mighty cough that threatens his young life. Carmen Rae’s lack of preparedness in both cleaning and cooking in her home has adversely affected her family to the point of near death for her infant: “Try as she might, she couldn’t understand these women who balked at killing a baby before it got here and then living so they’re sure to kill it after” (192). Mama Day is so disgusted with Carmen Rae’s inadequate mothering skills because her neglect for her baby’s food intake is the primary problem in her household. She castigates her for her lack of knowledge about Soul Food:

A sow takes better care of her young. And don’t be sitting there whining about a no-good daddy—if he ain’t never here, it means he ain’t stopped you from cleaning this house. And he ain’t the cause of you stuffing this child with white bread and sugar lard to keep him quiet while you’re watching them soap operas. (193)

As the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, Mama Day’s sympathy for Carmen
Rae is nil; her utter disgust with Carmen Rae matches Carmen Rae’s level of carelessness as a mother. To a Big Mama, feeding one’s own is not only a responsibility, it is a joy; for Carmen Rae, it is seemingly neither, a stance that Mama Day simply cannot abide:

That’s right, cry, you oughta cry. And while you’re at it, use them tears to water the truck garden you’re gonna start growing with a dollar’s worth of seeds and a little work. Chickens will eat anything you won’t eat—even their own mess—and give you eggs for breakfast to boot. God don’t like ugly, but He must have found something worth saving in [Carmen Rae] ‘cause the child was gonna make it.” (193-194)

While Carmen Rae is hapless in love and in caring for her children, she is not hopeless. Mama Day does what Big Mamas do—she feeds the soul. Mama Day gives Carmen Rae the necessary advice and tools to rebuild her shambles of a home, with knowledge about food. In essence, she prepares Carmen Rae to have greater access to natural, wholesome food. With time and luck, Carmen Rae’s love for her children will influence her love for cooking for them. Only then will Carmen Rae afford her family the opportunity to flourish because finally she will be giving them true Soul Food.

In the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s view, mothers are supposed to care for their young, and at the very least, this means that they should be filled with both love and nourishing food at the same time—Soul Food. Thus, as an African-American Archetypal Big Mama, Mama Day’s primary purpose is to pull her depraved young up to nourish and sustain them for a society and world where they are starved of equality and humanity. Her core, her very self, is in her food; the love that she puts into the meal transforms into an invisible shield to offset the inevitability of hurts and pain which are part and parcel to the African’s experience in America.
Hand in hand with her Soul Food, family members must be willing to swallow the African-American Archetypal Big Mama's advice, which is often swift and harsh. Carmen Rae certainly gets a tongue lashing that she will not soon forget. While proverbial sayings are found in every race and culture, in many African cultures they are of extreme importance because they help to define, set parameters, and govern a people: "[...] they not only teach lessons, reflect values, reinforce points, issue warnings, tender consolations, attack enemies, and philosophize about life, but also serve to distinguish the speaker and even to settle court disputes" (Dance 454). Proverbs aphorisms, advice and other "Mama"-isms are the trademark wisdom and voice of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Her way of speaking is a combination of folkloric proverbs and sermons, of encouragement and advice, of uplift and correction. Big Mama "tells it like it is." Her pithy expressions of love and correction are characterized by the use of improvisation, popular formulaic lines and familiar expressions; the insistence upon audience response; the use of repetition and parallel structure; the incorporation of metaphors, similes, allegory, alliteration, euphony, parallelism, balance, personification, antitheses, hyperbole, repetition, rhyme—the whole range of poetic techniques; the use of vernacular; the use of wordplay, wit, and humor; and the focus upon political and sociological issues of relevance to their audience. (251)

Such speech and wisdom cannot be learned in a university setting; to become a Big Mama, one must learn from a Big Mama.

As such, it is the African-American Archetypal Big Mama's responsibility to train her replacements, future Big Mamas, which means that she must educate them about the
ways of women; the chief lesson of which is how to find and keep a good man. Of
course, the sole purpose of such instruction is for young Big Mamas-in-training to create
more children for Big Mama to ‘love on’ and instruct in her knowledge, building up her
community. After all, “it is in the folklore of a people that we find out most about their
values and concerns, their innermost thoughts and desires” (xxxvii). Here, the African-
American Archetypal Big Mama’s ability to manipulate words and dispense knowledge
to her successors harkens back to a society of people who not only privilege oral
literatures and oral language, but also, and more importantly, they privilege the
perpetuation of morality through valued familial relationships.

It may be true, to a certain extent, that families are first grown in the mother’s
belly and then supported and sustained by her love. However, men are still vital to both a
successful pregnancy and rearing of children. Therefore, the African-American
Archetypal Big Mama knows what men want, and she has endless advice for young
women to acquire a mate. Mama Day certainly seems to know a bit about how to not only
obtain a man but also she is well versed in how to keep them sexually interested. Before
Cocoa arrives home on her yearly trip home, Mama Day makes it up in her mind that she
will speak with her about getting a man once and for all: “Ain’t no kinda sense, you
living in a place with more men than the whole of Georgia and South Carolina combined,
and can’t take care of business. There are ways, and there are ways—and she’d just have
to explain a few of ’em to [Cocoa]” (Naylor 35). Mama Day will teach Cocoa the art of
seduction when Cocoa returns for her annual pilgrimage home to Willow Springs. It
appears that Mama Day knows what she is talking about, for later when Cocoa is finally
married to George, she offers her an unforgettable lesson about the wonders of lemon
balm. According to Mama Day, her recipe has a powerfully scrumptious smell and taste,
making a woman irresistible to her mate: "[...] it’s good to change up every now and then—keep the man interested. And I’ll show you how to take a few fresh leaves and make up a nice female wash. It’ll have your insides smelling like lemons. [...] it don’t taste bad, either" (153). When Cocoa asks Mama Day if the “taste” that she is speaking of is in reference to her using it as a dressing on her husband’s salads, Mama Day slyly answers her, shrugging her shoulder, “If you wanna waste good lemon balm” (153). Clearly the balm is meant to be enjoyed, but not on a traditional plate.

However affronted and amused by this bold advice that Cocoa may be, she accepts it because she knows that Mama Day, as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, is always right. Additionally, Cocoa knows and trusts in Mama Day’s advice because Mama Day is fully aware that good sex alone is not all that a healthy relationship needs to work. When Cocoa gets into the biggest marital argument ever with George, Mama Day tells her that she should be the one to go and apologize to him. Despite what Cocoa may be feeling towards her husband, and despite the fact that, in Cocoa’s mind, it is always the woman who must be the grown up, Mama Day insists that she should be the one to make amends: "[...] if you care about someone enough, you give ‘em a chance to take back the things they may have said in anger. And you oughtta make the first move [...] we got more going for us than them. A good woman is worth two good men any day when she puts her mind to it. So the little bit we gotta give up, we don’t miss half as much” (240). As the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, Mama Day crafts her advice in favor of Cocoa’s intellect, a technique that speaks to the complex wisdom of some women. It also speaks to the power of oral literatures. African griots typically crafted their histories and stories to fit the audience that they were addressing in such a way that the audience members were often exalted. The same could be said of folktales
and of Mama Day’s advice here. To offer Cocoa counsel for their reconciliation with her husband is wise; to maneuver her speech in such a way that Cocoa, as the offended party (in her mind), feels superior is reminiscent of the griots of old, and it is a testament to Mama Day’s matchless power of spoken words as an African inheritance; it is a distinct indicator of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s wisdom. Mama Day is equipping Cocoa for life: for the here and now and for the future with her husband.

Truly, Mama Day knows that once relationships are made, they are difficult to maintain, despite the love between the two involved. Therefore, when she offers guidance to Cocoa it is not meant to whip her, or any woman, into utter submission and worship of her man, for Mama Day knows that danger as expressed here: “When you raise a god instead of a child, you’re bound to be serving him for the rest of your days. Same thing holds when you marry a god” (162). She does not want Bernice, Cocoa, or any young woman to feel as if the only way to keep a man happy is for the woman to cater to his every whim and agree with him on every issue. Her concern is for balance, which, here again, is the feature component of Africana spirituality and worldview: “Just like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside and an inside. All of it is the truth. But that takes a lot of work and young folks ain’t about working hard no more. When getting at the truth starts to hurt, it’s easier to turn away” (230). All too often, worship of a man eclipses love, and this heartache is something that Mama Day does not want for Cocoa as she has seen it in so many women before.

Mama Day tries to warn Cocoa and other women of this peril much like she attempted to warn Frances, a jilted woman in Willow Springs, of the volatility of unequal love: “A man don’t leave you unless he wants to go, Frances. And if he’s made up his mind to go, there ain’t nothing you, me or anybody else can do about that” (90).
Unfortunately, Francis does not listen; because of the inequality of emotions in her relationship with Junior Lee, Francis loses her mind and eventually dies for love. Mama Day sees Francis’s destruction before it even happens: “

She can dig all the holes she wants around Ruby’s door. Put in all the bits of glass and black pepper, every silver pin and lodestone she’ll find some fool to sell her. Make as many trips to the graveyard she wants with his hair, his pee, her pee. Walk naked in the moonlight and stinking with Van-Vanoil—and it won’t do a bit of good. ‘Cause the mind is everything”(90).

Any attempts to petition or conjure are futile when a woman’s mind is completely given over to her mate. She is rendered utterly ineffectual to her family, which, in the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s perspective, is her greatest purpose in life. Further, the universe will not respond to such a woman’s petitions; a person such as Francis has lost her perspective and her view of the greater things in life—especially balance. In a very mysterious manner, Francis literally disappears from her family in her very odd death. The disharmony of spirit that an unequal relationship promises stands as an example for why Mama Day will not allow or condone a relationship where a woman is subjugated. In her view, men and women should be the other’s true counterpart; where one is weak the other should be strong. As Mama Day says, “A woman shouldn’t have to fight her man to be what she [is]; he should be fighting that battle for her” (203). Mama Day is committed to the preservation and well being of women and consequently relationships. Sadly, the fact that she is thinking this thought to herself is quite telling. For all of the endless, faultless advice for male and female relationships that she doles out to others, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is a solitary figure. Without an equal to speak
of, she is largely alone.

Certainly, it is for Big Mama’s progeny that she lives and breathes. No one in her family or community is aware of any her personal hopes and dreams save her great desire for her progeny to achieve greatness in life. The extended family and surrounding population are convinced of her importance to the community, her spiritual and intellectual prowess, as well as her ability to feed their souls. However, they are oblivious to her isolation, which comes as a result of her presiding over their lives. While she may offer infinite, plausible guidance on affairs of the heart (which may even be a bit risqué) or on any trouble in life, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama has no equal partner in life to give her advice backing. Even if there is a grandfather around, he offers her no significance or importance; he has no impact upon the judgment and advice that she wields towards others. It was with the African mother deities that this examination began and consequently it is how it will end. Yemonja is largely alone, in her relentless pursuit of creating and sustaining life; Oshun, on the other hand, is not all consumed with her children—she has a life worth living of her own and thus she is not responsible for the welfare of her children in the same manner as Yemonja. As a warrior, Oshun fiercely protects her progeny when necessary, but children are not the primary occupants of her mind. In this way alone, Oshun may be loosely correlated with the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman, which will be examined in the chapter to follow. However, with respect to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, her constant adeptness at reconfiguring the lives of others leaves little room for Big Mama’s own personal growth and attention. As a result of all of the counsel that she metes out to others, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama has nothing left that is just hers alone. Mama Day’s only male suitor is “Old Arthur,” or arthritis, and in Big
Mama fashion she jokingly accosts him, while talking to her sister on the phone, for poking her in all of the wrong places (all the while missing the one right spot): “Felt Old Arthur this morning, and he sure don’t help. Just a poking me in my back, poking in my left hip. You think he gonna get it right one day and start poking in my---”(37). While she laughs with Abigail about her life’s deficiency of her own man to love, she admits to herself, during quiet times, that such solitude is no laughing matter.

Being the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is a largely lonesome road, for while giving herself completely over to the lives of her loved ones, she redefines herself by them—by their problems, their shortcomings, and their inadequacies. Somewhere in that sea of human emotions her own thoughts and feelings have been sequestered to her very depths. That is after all where African mother water deities live. Who the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is, on a very basic level, becomes one with what others need her to be for them.

In a self-induced state of becoming one with the first mother, Sapphira Wade, Mama Day feels both comfort and regret for having never been cherished by anyone for any length of time throughout all of her days on the earth. She longs to return to the first relationship of love and bonding, that of being her mother’s daughter:

Daughter. The word comes to cradle what has gone past weariness […] There’s only the sense of being. Daughter. Flooding through like fine streams of hot, liquid sugar to fill the spaces where there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers. Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. (283)

In her world of seclusion, a fantasy for Mama Day is her memory of being fed
with the first, sweetest milk, through her mother because she was not given the opportunity to be a cherished daughter for long (as Mama Day’s own mother suffered from mental illness and was not “present” even when she was physically present with her family). Mama Day was a little more than a baby when she had to take the reins of the household as Mother that her own mother could no longer fill. For this reason, Mama Day’s fantasy of her own Big Mama vanishes, and she is immediately thrust back into her duty. Mama Day’s thoughts immediately return to unspoken truth that being the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is often synonymous with sacrificing her individuality.

This cross that Mama Day bears is a heavy one. Belonging to others means that she is no longer a daughter or sister first. It also means that she cannot be defined as belonging to someone else as a lover. As such, Mama Day convinces herself that the men that she wants so badly for the women in her family are not her desire at all. She ruminates on how after all of the heartache that she has seen in her lifetime of relentless “catching” and raising babies that it is in the end simply not in the cards for her. Mama Day thinks about how her life has been, for as long as she can remember, defined by being someone else’s mother despite the fact that fact that she, herself, never gives birth: “Being there for mama and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. […] It ain’t fair that came with a high price, but it did. I can’t hold this home together by myself. And Abby, she ain’t strong like you. We need you, Little Mama. […] Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own” (88). It is Mama Day’s father who petitioned her for help to hold the family together when things become too much for him to bear alone as the sole parent in their household. She cannot deny her father’s request and subsequent life title as Big Mama any more than she can deny her cohesiveness with
her ancestors and spirit. Mama Day’s father out of desperation offered a petition that was unfairly placed upon a child, but it is the cloak of responsibility as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama that Mama Day is covered with for the rest of her life.

Alone, Mama Day thinks about how this dedication of her life to others canceled any prospects of love of her own. As such, Big Mama has no ownership of her own body, of her own sexuality. She attempts to tell herself, unconvincingly, that love is simply not worth the headache and that she is no different from many other women:

You fear that sometimes for [married] women, that they would just fold up and melt away. She’d seen it happen so much in her time, too much for her to head on into it without thinking. Yes, that one time when she was way, way young. But after that, looking at all the beating, the badgering, the shriveling away from a lack of true touching was enough to give her pause. And not that any man—even if he had tried—coulda ever soaked up the best in her. But who needed to wake up each morning cussing the day just to be sure you still had your voice? [...] So a lot of ‘em is waking up like me, except they’re waking up young and alone. (203)

Mama Day further convinces herself that the love that she did not have with the man that she wanted as a young woman is of no consequence:

Saw so much heartbreak, maybe I never wanted to have my own. Maybe I never thought about it. Except that once. That one summer of the boy with the carnival smile. Lean as an ear of Silver Queen corn and lips just as sweet.[...]Make no kind sense, them memories.[...] Mama and child. Mama and sister. Too heavy a load to take away. Why, even Abigail called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own
right. Abigail’s had three and I’ve had—Lord, can’t count ‘em—into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now. (88-89)

Again, her fantasy of love immediately returns to her responsibility to her progeny; she is not a human being or even a woman with the right to love someone else. She is the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, which means that she is the property of her children. At times, being so essential to her children is a gift and a curse that is simply too great: “You have a gift, Little Mama. But who asked her for it? Who made her God?” (262). She did not ask for it, but her caring for others is the trademark of her existence.

Such isolation is quite grave, and it may explain the dichotomy of how many African Americans mothers respect the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, but in essence know that they can not or perhaps will not live up to her standards. For many, the cost of seclusion and veritable asexuality in preference for the lives of all others in their family is simply too high. While her value and her wisdom are priceless, the solitude that corresponds to such magnanimity is unenviable. The salient markers of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama are mimicked to a certain degree by many African-American mothers, it is often only partially so. Of course, that partiality for greatness has a polar end as well, which as despicable as Big Mama is delightful—Big Mama’s Opposite, the “Whistlin’ Woman.”
"A whistlin’ woman and a cacklin’ hen ain’t never come to no good end."

Big Mama is indeed the Archetype of African-American motherhood and the figurehead of the African-American family, especially as evidenced by the character Mama Day. She is the sacred cow, as it were (to many), for no matter what she says or does, to speak ill of her would be anathema to not only the family, but to African-American culture and the entire community. In fact, those who dare speak against Big Mama and the archetypal sanctity that she represents as the indestructible pillar to the community are often immediately cast as enemies and villains. For, truly, on nearly any playground, park, or space where African-American children congregate and play, chatter about someone’s “Mama” in a less than flattering light is a dangerous game; quite often such banter is taken to be “fighting words.” This hallowed status of African-American motherhood is true of real life and of African-American life portrayed in literature.

Yet, counter Big Mamas exist, and the only way to fully appreciate and understand the mythological substance and value of Big Mama to the African-American community is through a thorough examination of her opposite. In fact, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama can only exist if there is indeed an opposite. After all, love means nothing without the value of hate; death would have no sting without the vicissitudes of a life well lived. Likewise, Big Mama’s celebrated rank as Super Mother
is made all the more glorious with the presence and persistence of the poor excuse of a mother who lives just down the road from such perfection.

My own mother grew up in a household full of Big Mamas, in pure African-American Archetypal form, but she was also well acquainted with Big Mama's opposite. Along with her father, who only occasionally made a significant appearance in her life, she lived with her great grandmother, grandmother, three great aunts, and her own mother. These highly spiritual women, who lived directly across the road from the church that they attended almost daily, nourished and fed her with the Soul Food that she now doles out to her own children and grandchildren. In this house, there was only one exception to the sacred lineage of Big Mamas—Aunt Pug, a woman of ill repute who the Big Mamas "adopted" when a distant cousin abandoned her as a child. Aunt Pug was a Whistlin' Woman.

In my great-great grandmother's home women did not whistle; like a cackling hen, such a woman bespoke trouble. A woman who whistled was behaving in a reproachful manner—whistling implied an unacceptable freedom that resisted and rejected the mule mantle of African-American motherhood considered to be both duty and privilege by many.¹ Aunt Pug had several children, but she did not raise them; the Big Mamas did. Food abounded in the house, but she did not cook it. She was never at home long enough to do so. For, every other day when the women of the house marched in neat procession across the dirt road to the church, children trailing untidily behind them, Aunt Pug shimmied on down the road in the opposite direction into the arms of her latest male distraction. She was whistling all the way. Of course, Pug was a source of extreme fascination for my mother who was a very curious child. However, her curiosity changed to disdain when my mother was caught whistling in imitation of Aug Pug. Her
great-grandmother and grandmother gave her a dose of African-American Archetypal Big Mama medicine—one with a slap and the other with the pronouncement that she was to hear for the very first time: “A whistlin’ woman and a cacklin’ hen ain’t never come to no good end.” It was not their discipline that held the memory in her mind so much as her glimpse of Aunt Pug openly laughing at her for being punished. This behavior in an adult confounded my mother; Aunt Pug’s careless reaction towards my mother’s punishment marked her indelibly, especially since it was the only time that she can remember garnering any attention from Pug. My mother wondered why Pug was never disciplined for whistling as a grown woman; further, she was baffled as to why Pug was allowed to behave unlike every other grown woman that she knew. In any case, thereafter, my mother secretly waited for Aunt Pug’s “no good end.” Unfortunately, several years later, she got her wish, as an angry lover choked Aunt Pug to death when she simply tired of him; for some reason he felt that he should have been the exception to her rule of discarding men like yesterday’s trash. Most of the people who attended her funeral were only interested in making sure that Pug was truly dead; wronged married and unmarried women, handsome and homely men, all disposable, all victims left in the wake of her self-centeredness came with their own final nails of hatred for her coffin. After her death, the Big Mamas in my mother’s house never voluntarily mentioned her again, perhaps out of remorseful regret that, even with all of their powers to heal a broken spirit, they could not rescue Pug from her mighty, spirit-less depths of uncaring. Any attempts to find out more about Pug after her death were abruptly cut short by both the Big Mamas and Pug’s children; happily free from the stigma that came along with Pug’s less than kind reputation, even her own children joined the community in stepping over her life as effortlessly as they would a known bump the road. In life, she was a community
aberration; to them, her death simply uprooted a flaw from an otherwise smooth foundation.

In theory, this simple equation of “dead equals gone” should have worked, but it did not; Pug was not in fact “gone.” The community’s yearning for Pug’s psychological demise would not come as easily as her physical one, nor would it come without a price, especially for her children. For, while Aunt Pug was an irritant, even to her own family, the infection was much more than skin deep. When she did leave in body, the relief to nearly all who were touched by her was only temporary. Resist as they might, Pug was implanted in their souls. Accordingly, as adults, each of Pug’s children either followed in her unruly footsteps or fell into some other form of criminal waywardness, most likely due to their ambivalent, unresolved feelings about her “mothering” or lack thereof. Even in death, this Whistlin’ Woman shaped and fashioned the future of her children, as if she never left them at all.

The Whistlin’ Woman’s potential for such viral influence is one of the reasons why persons in the community despise her so. For, while many African Americans at least know of a Whistlin’ Woman, the general reaction is to quietly attempt sweeping her under the rug, despite the fact that the embers of controversy (and embarrassment to the community that she stirs) constantly threaten to destroy the hallmark and ideals of mythological African-American motherhood. Hence, she is reviled, more than anything because of who she is not; for everything that Big Mama is and represents, her reverse, the Whistlin’ Woman, rejects.

Yet, despite what people think of her and despite attempts to make her seem to be smaller than she truly is, the Whistlin’ Woman shapes the African-American Big Mama, giving her a distinctive form, due to the Whistlin Woman’s marked convergence from
Big Mama’s Definitive Characteristics. Hence, where Big Mama’s “big”-ness is collectively loved and appreciated in the eyes of the community, the Whistlin’ Woman is an eyesore for the same—leaving nothing in place but overwhelmingly collective scorn. Similarly, as Big Mama is a powerfully spiritual woman, the Whistlin’ Woman’s spirituality is distorted, as any devotion to spirit is directed towards her own divine church of self. Additionally, in skewed spiritual covenant with herself alone, she refuses to provide her family with Soul Food in African-American Archetypal Big Mama fashion; even worse, she acts a succubus to their souls, feeding off her family members’ self-esteem and self worth as if they are rare delicacies. Speaking of sustenance, where Big Mama’s wisdom and aphorisms are therapeutic and often followed with a bit of sugar to help the medicine go down, the Whistlin’ Woman’s wisdom is anathematic. If she has something “helpful” to say, it must be swallowed with her gall of poisonous words, which seep into the very bones and psyches of those unlucky enough to receive her counsel. Finally, while the surrounding community is unaware of the solitude and loss to self that the African-American Archetypal Big Mama experiences as a result of her constant caring for others, the Whistlin’ Woman seemingly enjoys her isolation as a byproduct bonus of her refusal to care. The emptiness of space that the Whistlin’ Woman creates, devoid of all others, is a space all her own and while it comes as a result of her thoughtless, indifferent actions towards others, such self-enforced solitude is compounded by the fact that she could care less that her actions adversely affect others. In fact, the true reason why she is so hated is because a Whistlin’ Woman makes the Choice to believe that she is the rightful owner of her own body, that she should be the center of her existence, which means that she is dedicated to no one but herself. This Choice is in direct resistance to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama.
Truly, in order to understand and employ the African-American Archetype of Big Mama, one must first accept the "fluidity and changeability of th [is] figure, which is dependent upon their historical context and the genre of literature in which [she is] employed" (Pratt 164). In other words, to recognize the heights of Big Mama in all of her glory, one must also be aware of the depths of disgrace in her opposite. Fascinatingly, such pronounced disgrace for the Whistlin’ Woman can be traced back to Africana childhood experience.

As innocent as they may sound on the surface, songs, ring games, hand play and folktales shared among children in the African-American community are primary sources of Africana folklore. They are storehouses of knowledge, which warn against all matters of life, including such a woman as the Whistlin’ Woman. These “amusements” are generally “full of dramatic confrontations and conflict” because “[the] world the Southern [African American] child awakes to every morning is a complex and often brutal one” (Jones and Hawes xv). What is often deemed to be simply interactive play (for those unwise to coded messages in the Africana tradition) is actually functional and utilitarian in that hidden messages contained therein are instructive of how persons should and not conduct themselves in the African-American community. When the sung or chanted games become repetitive or have some sort of chorus in the lyrics, it is with the purpose to drive home salient lessons on how one should behave on a daily basis: “The openly dramatized content of [the African-American child’s] reflections upon this world, is apt, therefore, to be very down to earth. Both games and plays deal with realistic situations: getting food, quarreling with your mother, finding a suitable partner, working” (xv). This form of play is actually a clever technique stressing tactics for survival.
children about their duties and responsibilities to the world, so do African Americans in modern games, rhymes, and play. Teachers of such play are in effect "passing on that part of [their] knowledge [they] considered to be ‘good’ for children" (xvii). Learning what is "good" also means learning about good character and how to avoid falling out of balance, as African spirituality dictates.

Such lessons may be taught by negation, of what one should not do, highlighting bad character and the danger of falling out of balance. In effect, there are such games which warn of the bold Whistlin' Woman, a completely unbalanced person who dares to believe that her life belongs to her alone, shattering the Africana worldview of belonging to the community of the universe, and thus deviating from the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Usually, in the purposeful play, the consequences for such brazen, unacceptable independence are dire because the offense to the universe is momentous.

For example, it was not uncommon in post-antebellum African-American society for a young woman to be "put on the banjo"—her crimes and/or disobedience would be relayed to the town at night, sung to the tune of a banjo. This was done in order to both shame her and whip her into communal submission:

Girls hab tuh be keahful den. Dey caahn be so trifling lak some ub em is now. In Africa dey gets punished. Sometime wen dey bin bad, dey put um on duh banjo. Dat wuz in dis country. Wen day play dat night, dey sing bout dat girl an dey tell all bout uh. Das putting uh on duh banjo. Den ebrybody know an dat girl sho bettuh change uh ways.

(Courlander 288-289)
Excusing the imprecision in the rendering of the eye dialect of this piece, the message is quite clear: female offenders—those who go against what is expected of them will be humiliated.

Of course in more modern times, gossip is the often the vehicle of one’s supposed wrongdoings, but there were also songs of my mother’s generation such as the plight of Lou Liza Jane, which mimics West African folk dramas which were also an educational tool for proper behavior. According to my mother, in this ring game, one child, “Lou Liza Jane,” was placed in the center of a ring, while the other children danced around her and sang of her exploits. The unforgivable offenses stacked against Lou Liza Jane were her dark complexion, her uselessness in the kitchen, and, most importantly, her choice to be alone. As all of the children danced around her in a circle, the blindfolded “Lou Liza Jane” would point to the unlucky person that she would “steal;” children attempted to dance faster to dodge her cursed finger. The song play ended with the phrase “That old man ain’t got no wife, but he wouldn’t have her for to save his life.” In short, no one wants Lou Liza Jane because she is a decision maker; she chooses what and with whom she will spend her time.

In tandem with the ideal of a woman decision maker, there is also the folk song by Ida Cox, entitled “Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues.” It tells the story of a woman who has considered the restrictive role of traditional womanhood and rejected it, with the final verdict that being “wild” is a much better existence. She is seriously “involved” with no one but herself and truly enjoys the freedom she finds in being wild. She warns other women to become wild because her lifestyle, as a wild woman, is the only way that a woman can “get by” (Dance 119-120). Indeed, the whole notion of Choice that these Whistlin’ Women embrace is equated with power, and this is something that the
community deems an unworthy quality for a woman, as it is a contradiction to the
African-American Archetypal Big Mama.

In fact, this contradiction is the key characteristic of the Whistlin’ Woman: Choice. Because she chooses her own life over the life of others, so counter to the
African-American Archetypal Big Mama, the community, through games, play and
songs, come up with a horrible ending for what they deem to be an inappropriately
carefree life. She must therefore, have a “no good end.” At the heart of this dilemma is
the fact that the strict reins often placed upon the African-American woman as the “mule
of the world” is far too rigid. Everyone and everything has a breaking point and for some
women, it is simply easier to be “free” and face the scorn of the world than to live life as
a bridled animal. Yet the community is still puzzled by such rejection. Even though they
have been warned of women who make choices in proverbs, games and songs, to witness
such unapologetic non-conformity is both daunting and fascinating.

Because the Whistlin’ Woman is such a hard pill to swallow in that she is in
diametrically opposed to what the African-American Archetypal Big Mama represents,
the Whistlin’ Woman is only scarcely mentioned in much of African-American literature.
Few have dared to broach this character or even the subject of African-American mothers
as possibly being imperfect or poor mothers. For an author to speak against Big Mama is,
for many in the African-American community, committing the sin of simultaneously
airing the dirty laundry of the race and then selling it—for free. While she specifically
chose not the have children, the protagonist Sula in Toni Morrison’s novel by the same
name, is definitely a Whistlin’ Woman—in fact, she made the Choice to “make herself”
and not someone else, much to the dismay of her own grandmother and community (92).
To a certain extent, Mama in Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man* and the three whores who lived
above the Breedlove’s apartment, as well as Mrs. Breedlove, in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* come close to defining the African-American Archetypal Big Mama in reverse. In Daniel Black’s most recent novel, *Perfect Peace*, the character Mae Helen typifies the Whistlin’ Woman’s hateful, remorseless mothering, at least with respect to her dark-skinned child. She worships her other daughters because they typify all that is beautiful to her—light skin and “good” hair; her youngest daughter does not and is thus rejected. One could reasonably assume that use of the surname Lovejoy in the novel *Perfect Peace* is most probably in homage to arguably one of the most villainous of Whistlin’ Women in African-American literature: Mudear. For, no author more clearly paints the picture of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s opposite than Tina McElroy Ansa in the novels *Ugly Ways* and *Taking After Mudear*, via the incomparable, unforgettable character, Esther Lovejoy or Mudear.

In the novel *Ugly Ways*, readers meet three adult sisters, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth, all of whom are successful women: Betty owns two highly profitable beauty salons in their small hometown of Mulberry, Georgia, Emily is an efficacious historical archivist in Atlanta, Georgia, and Annie Ruth is a thriving television correspondent in Los Angeles, California. To outsiders, these women seemingly “have it all” with respect to financial achievement. However, a closer look at each of the women reveals the fact that they suffer, in varying degrees, from emotional handicaps as a result of their extraordinary childhood experience—for starters, each daughter is pronouncedly promiscuous and all of them have extreme difficulties forming healthy relationships (outside of their sister circle).

Betty, the oldest daughter, is unable to see herself for the beautiful woman that she is because she defines herself in terms of how her mother sees her—“big-boned”
(Ansa *Ugly Ways* 27); subsequently she is unable to fully commit to relationships, which are largely sexual (her current tryst with a young man twenty years her junior makes her extremely uncomfortable). Betty also goes through a period of time when she cannot stop scratching herself, even after she is given prescriptive lotions to soothe her what ails her (14). Because what ails her is much more than skin deep, she is unable to find relief. In a similar vein, not even the marijuana that Emily, the middle daughter, frequently smokes can soothe her attempts and successive failures again and again with respect to love, nor does it assuage her habit of talking through “clenched teeth” or driving around her Atlanta neighborhood at all times of day and night, “looking for all the world like a wolf clutching the steering wheel of her red Datsun, her eyes darting dangerously here and there, always in search of something” (13). What Emily is in search of is perhaps what all of the Lovejoy daughters are in search of, including Annie Ruth, the youngest daughter, whose promiscuity is as legendary as her skills as a reporter. With national prominence and accomplishment, Annie Ruth is seemingly the least likely candidate to completely fall apart, yet she suffers a nervous breakdown at work, and she frequently sees cats, invisible to everyone else, which frighten her horribly. The one thing that eludes these women, which is the source of the contradictions between their public and private lives, is the woman who gives birth to them: Mudear. Of her own daughters’ mental deficiencies, Mudear is known to say (to her own daughters no less): “Save that crazy shit for your own time” (14). Such detachment, captured in that phrase, typifies Mudear and her lack of care about her daughters’ well being. Obviously, such a statement is not the usual response for a mother to have towards her own children when they are hurting, but Mudear is not an ordinary mother—she certainly is not the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Mudear is a Whistlin’ Woman.
Before her “change,” Esther Lovejoy was once a typical mother to her daughters—she dutifully looked after both her husband and her children in African-American Archetypal Big Mama fashion, making sure that their every need was met. She made sure that they were clean and that they were well fed. Mudear saw to it that her husband’s position in the household was firmly planted as chief—like a dutiful servant, she even made sure that his nails, colored with white chalk from his work in the kaolin mines, were neatly trimmed and buffed to a beautiful shine (50). Her only act of open disobedience to him was her curious habit of burning the okra every night; as it turns out, it was a sign of a change brimming under the surface of her reality: “While burning the okra, while renaming her husband ‘Mr. Bastard,’ while putting aside a few pennies, a nickel, a quarter, Mudear had waited for this time, this contradictory, kiss-my-ass time. She bided her time and waited” (130). A change finally did come, for when the Lovejoy daughters were ten, eight, and five years old, Mudear’s mothering abruptly ceased.

What is left in place of the love that they once took for granted is indifference, which changes their abilities to even remember Mudear as a caring person. While bathing, as an adult, in her mother’s personal bathtub, Annie Ruth tries to remember what it would have been like to bathe with her mother as a child, but the picture in her head continues to vanish: “She leaned back and tried to imagine how she had felt as a little girl sitting between a young Mudear’s short legs, propped up against her stomach, the back of her head nestled between her mother’s breasts. Annie Ruth could almost picture it, but she kept losing the picture” (140). In fact, the only daughter to remember Mudear as a mother, in African-American Archetypal Big Mama form is the oldest daughter, Betty: “I’m the only one of us who knows what it’s like to really have a mother. To play outside with the other children in the neighborhood ‘til we got motley with grit and dirt and mud
and to be called in by our mother to take a bath at dusk, a mother who allowed us to walk barefoot all evening so we had to wash our feet again before bedtime” (28). This is the mother that Betty attempts to relay to her younger sisters, to remind herself and them that they at least had a mother, a Big Mama, at some point in their lives. Yet, Mudear’s presence in their lives breaks the fantastical world that Betty creates through her tales of old; the changed Mudear eclipses images of such fancy. What remains is the truth that Mudear exchanged mothering for Mudear-ing—she began to look after her wants and her needs alone:

Sometimes, for Mudear, doing what she felt like doing meant cooking a good hot dinner every day for a week for her family. [...] But most days, it meant fixing something scrumptious for herself while the girls and Poppa were away at school and work, then sleeping through dinnertime, leaving her family to fend for itself. Sometimes she’d clean up the bathroom a bit.[...] But never anything as strenuous and distasteful as scrubbing around the inside of the toilet or mopping the floor.[...] But over the months after Mudear’s change, these simple duties she chose to perform became less and less frequent with all the girls taking up the slack Mudear left. Until the time when everybody in the household seemed to look up and discover Mudear didn’t do a damn thing in the house. (208)

Mudear no longer looked after the needs of her family, either physically or emotionally; in fact she conveyed her lack of care both in words and action for the remainder of her life and even beyond that in her death. Betty, a mere ten-year old at the time of Mudear’s change, took the initiative to feed her sisters on the first night of Mudear’s motherly departure, with the only thing that her tiny arms could reach, graham
crackers and bologna (206). She becomes the default mother of the house: “At first, Betty was just barely able to keep herself and the girls relatively clean and fed because they had a washer and dryer and Poppa gave her enough money when he took her to the grocery store to keep the refrigerator full of food” (209). Betty continues to do her best to mother her younger sisters because without a mother, she feels it is her “duty” to lovingly look after them (205). Despite the fact that it is strong, Betty’s love is not enough to replace the irreplaceable love of a mother. As a result of having little or no example of what typical motherhood and motherly love looks like and feels like, the girls live fractured lives.

Being emotionally starved, the daughters depart from reality, in emotionally defunct ways, in order to cope with their mother’s non-mothering. It is Mudear’s death that brings the daughters together again in Mulberry, and in mulling over her life, the women must come to grips with what in fact Esther Lovejoy was to them and how her marked cruelty as an “anti-mother” shaped their lives, especially in light of the fact that Annie Ruth, the youngest sister, is expecting her first child. Even in Mudear’s death, the Lovejoy girls are still not whole as women because their feelings about Mudear’s influence remain unresolved. The night that they all gather together after Mudear’s death, Annie Ruth admits, “She’s all we ever talk about really.[…] We start out with our jobs and then men and then clothes and then book we’ve read, then bills, but we always end up talking about Mudear” (31). Like Aunt Pug, Mudear, in death, is not gone. In fact, readers are privy to Mudear’s posthumous thoughts and actions, which are no less vicious now that she no longer has a physical body.

In the sequel to Ugly Ways, Taking After Mudear, Mudear continues to emotionally commandeer the lives of her daughters as they attempt to move on from her
death and care for the newest member of the family, Annie Ruth’s baby, Mae Jean. Mudear sees that her daughters have no intentions of following in her footsteps—they are “sick of being a product of Mudear,” (255) so Mudear decides that she wants Mae Jean for herself: “Heck, they was my own flesh and blood and still they wasn’t ever really my girls. Never could count on them to take my side. But that little one. That Mae Jean. Now she gon’ be mine. She gon’ take after her Mudear. I’m mo see to that. She gon’ be mine for real, body and soul. And those girls ain’t got nothing to say about it” (Taking After Mudear 168). Because her influence is so strong, even in death, Mudear commandeers the thoughts and actions of her daughters, without them ever realizing it, until Mudear makes it apparent that dead does not mean gone: “I guess I had to die for my luck to change. ‘Cause since they planted me in the cold, cold ground, I been busier than I ever was when I was ‘live”(61). For Betty, Mudear wills her into becoming a lover of plants, a pseudo-gardener—something Betty vowed to never do, as gardening is Mudear’s only passion: “I ain’t never gonna even grow a weed!” Betty had sworn [as a child]”(35). Betty not only grows a garden but one full of Mudear’s favorite plants. Emily is also unable to shake her dead mother’s grip on her mind—she listens to Mudear’s voice in her head, instructing her bury Mae Jean’s caulk in Mudear’s garden (109) and suggesting that the sisters name the baby after Mudear (153). For Arnie Ruth, Mudear uses her greatest fear—cats—to manifest herself in physical form, threatening to “take” Mae Jean from her crib (184). Mudear’s sinister attempts to claim Mae Jean, beyond the grave, cause the women to call up strength they did not know that they had in order to dissolve Mudear’s grip of emotional and psychological annihilation upon all of their lives. Because the novels are inextricably linked in the elucidation of the Whistlin’ Woman as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s opposite, they will be used in tandem.
Hence, the first Definitive Characteristic of this Whistlin’ Woman, Mudear, is contrary of the collective love that the community has for the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s “big”-ness. Because of how Mudear treats her daughters and their outward expressions of insanity, the community of Mulberry holds nothing but scorn for her. Whereas Big Mama is adored and even worshipped because she lives and breathes for her family, which includes the surrounding community, the Whistlin’ Woman, on the other hand, is dismissed as being a cultural dissention on her own island. However, in giving the Whistlin’ Woman any attention and such concerted derision makes her big as well. Although the Whistlin’ Woman’s “big”-ness contradicts with every single feature of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama; she is unlike her African matriarchal forebears. She exploits the title of mother (misusing it to justify her injustices towards her children), and instead of protecting her children, she is the one from whom they need protection. Also, unlike the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, the Whistlin’ Woman cannot detect evil or impending harm to her children because of her own wickedness and clouded vision; in her view every other human being but her is pitiable and dismissible.

No one pities the Whistlin’ Woman in Mulberry but many may wish to dismiss Esther Lovejoy or Mudear as simply being crazy since she is determined to live her life apart from them. The legends that form around Mudear’s name are that of a truly mad woman and lest they fall to such a lowly state, mothers often warn their children of the dangers of her choice of nonconformity with the admonishment, “Stop doing that child[…] you gon’ end up as crazy as Esther Lovejoy” (236). Of course, that “state” for the Whistlin’ Woman is a marked refusal to care. As such, the Whistlin’ Woman, in the
character Mudear, is not hurt by the lore that surrounds her name; instead, she is amused by the community’s imaginings of her fate:

Esther probably getting her ass whipped in that house [...] Yeah, Esther a captive in that house.[...] Some folks in town spread the rumor that Mudear had some horrible facial disfigurement that caused her to set herself apart from the world, ashamed of the way she looked.[...] Mudear had somehow heard all these rumors [...] and none of them disturbed the self-contained woman. She even laughed at some of the rumors.

(Ugly Ways 61)

The community is not amused—in fact, Mudear’s emotional departure causes the people of Mulberry to hate her all the more. This reaction of mutual, communal abhorrence is not an autonomous one. In fact, the all African-American town of Mulberry was taught to hate the Whistlin’ Woman when they were yet children through Africana traditional play.

Therefore, the community dissatisfaction with feminine command is what makes Mudear, in both of Ansa’s novels so despised. She is punished through gossip and scorn because of the community’s confusion with her Choice. She is not in the least bit concerned, but this does not answer the quandary as to how she came to be. For, one day, for no apparent reason to anyone in Mulberry, Mudear underwent a change. She made a Choice. The busy wife and young mother of three girls suddenly went into both physical and emotional seclusion. Unbeknownst to the community, Mudear’s “freedom” came after she paid a heating bill that her husband was unable to, allowing Mudear to assume self-centered power in her household. After being a victim of mule-dom, Mudear breaks from her reins, especially those held by her husband: “[...] he just didn’t understand that
after I got his ass that time when I did have a few dollars—thank you Lord Jesus—and he didn’t, that I didn’t have no use for no money no more. After that I got everything I wanted without having to spend a dime. Hee hee” (Ugly Ways 78). Mudear gets whatever she wants by doing for no one but herself; after Mudear pays that bill, her daughters are simply a consequence—victims left in the wake of her non-hostile takeover of the household. Soon after Mudear’s Choice, her very young daughters begin to take up the tasks that the heretofore-archetypal mother once did without complaint. As such, they are taught not to complain to her about their lack of food, comfort, or for any vestiges of motherly care and attention: “For a while, it seemed that every day brought another task that Mudear eschewed—combing her daughters’ hair, bathing them, making sure they brushed their teeth, fixing their school lunches, replying to notes from their teachers, ironing, sweeping the kitchen floor. And every day, Betty or one of the other girls made sure the task was done” (Taking After Mudear 37). Even listening to her daughters when the troubles of life come into play is unacceptable to Mudear:

Never did come crying to me with some silly little stuff that they knew I didn’t have no interest in. I never could stand a whole lot a’ childish crying and whining. ‘This teacher don’t like me, she look at me funny all day’ [...] ‘So and so say she ain’t gonna play with me ‘cause her mama won’t let her.’ ‘I might not have enough credits to graduate.’” (Ugly Ways 106-107)

The Lovejoy daughters learn not come to Mudear with the difficulties of their lives because they are trained, through her indifference, that their lives are of no consequence to her.
No one in Mulberry is fully aware of what Ernest and his daughters live with on a daily basis, nor are they certain about the situation that causes her to go into seclusion. The community members do not suspect (at least openly) that the restrictions and cloud-capped expectations of African-American mothers to become African-American Archetypal Big Mamas may be the cause, much like many are unaware that truly “successful” Big Mamas pay a heavy cost; they are largely alone as a consequence of their straight line submission to others in deference to themselves. Thus, the effect is to attempt to come up with reasons and explanations for Mudear’s out-of-order behavior; some assume that she is suffers from agoraphobia, that she is being kept against her will by her husband, that she is being beaten by him, or that she was badly burned by fish grease; some simply conclude that she is an alcoholic (22). Anything but imbalance in traditional Africana gender expectations must be to blame, so a legend grows in and around Mudear’s name to provide explanation for her: “Betty knew that people in town had all manner of theories concerning Mudear and why she stayed in the house. Over the years, a mythology had grown up around her as if she were some mighty goddess like Oshun out of an ancient legend” (60). Like Oshun, African mother deity of the river waters, Mudear makes the Choice to be the architect of her own life, embrace and love life with all her might, and contently belong to no one in total: “[Oshun] is a symbol of gaiety, music, the arts and human pleasure. She represents the joy of life and is, in many ways, what makes life worth living” (Gonzalez-Wippler 104). In fact, Mudear is more than happy with her Choice and new life, and she instructs her daughters to tell concerned friends that she is not only fine, but better than fine: “The only thing Betty truly hated handling was the telephone calls and visits—curious, hurt, confused, frantic, insistent, indignant—from Mudear’s former friends inquiring about her sudden disappearance.
‘Mudear say she fine, better than fine. She just don’t feel like coming out or talking’” (Ansa Ugly Ways 211). In this way, Mudear takes after the orisha of sweet waters. However, unlike Oshun, Mudear is not concerned with the happiness of others; her own joy is what is paramount in this, her new existence: “Oshun is the orisha of unconditional love, receptivity, diplomacy...[she] is a river divinity symbolizing clarity and flowing motion” (Karade 26). The only true motions associated with Mudear are her movements in her garden at night, the one thing that she openly loves and cares for. In death, she says what is evident in her life—that the garden is the one thing that she is most proud of; as a second thought, Mudear says that the garden is second only to her daughters in terms of her pride, but no one in the house is convinced of anything otherwise (Ansa Ugly Ways 36).

Mudear never has to voice the love of her garden to her children; they are fully aware that it is the object of her affection, as Annie Ruth remembers: “Mudear took better care of this garden than she ever took of us” (216). With countless varieties of fragrant plants and flowers, vegetables and fruits that she lovingly attends to, only at night, the garden flourishes as much as her family withers under her hand. Betty continues the stream of thought to include what her steadfast attention to the garden (while ignoring her family) meant: “Mudear grew a buffer around this house. The plants and the trees and flowers set us off from this whole neighborhood. [...] As soon as a boy walked you back home, they could see from our house, we were strange and different” (217). The garden is exquisitely odd, so out of sync with the rest of Mulberry that the daughters are unfairly roped into the disdain that the community holds for Mudear.

The Lovejoys are different because of small “big”-ness of Mudear, but this communal disapproval for the woman of the house does not stop the town from
persecuting the misfortune of her family members. Unfortunately, for the Lovejoy women, Mulberry takes their venomous feelings of confusion toward Mudcar and blankets her peculiarities over her whole family as well: “Some said the whole family had ‘walking insanity’ like other folks had ‘walking pneumonia’ [...] as far as people in Mulberry were concerned all the Lovejoys were walking-, talking-, working-, shopping-crazy” (11). Despite the fact that the Lovejoy daughters relay to Mudear what is going on in their community and world, Mudear, as the Whistlin’ Woman, does not attempt to protect them from the community of Mulberry and world, so dissimilar to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. In fact, when Mudear (in death) catches wind of her daughters being less than appreciative of her “influence,” she is disgusted by her daughters’ lack of gratitude: “Good God! ‘Mudear didn’t do this. Mudear didn’t do that.’ Whine, whine, whine. Those ungrateful, triflin’ women! Hell, I coulda just walked out and left them orphan girls. But no I stayed so they could have the benefits of a mama.[...] It’s a damn shame you got to die before you see how your children really feel about you” (149). In her view, her unparalleled example as a Whistlin’ Woman should suffice as the “benefits of mama”—simply being in their presence should have been adequate enough for them. As a Whistlin’ Woman, having to protect her children from people is unthinkable, especially in light of the fact that she at least physically remained in their lives. After all, if Mudear were to admit that her daughters need protection, it would also signal that Mudear is amiss in some way as a mother—that her Choice is somehow erroneous. Such an admission is counter to Mudear’s cut and dry Choice to have her own personal freedom.

As a result, when the world is too much for the Lovejoy daughters, they must remember to “look to the stars;” they must hold their heads high whenever they must face
the town with its accusatory stares and actions (Taking After Mudear 6). It is a lesson that the Lovejoy girls must be tested on frequently, for even those persons who should have sympathy for them, who should be beacons of safety, blame the girls because they are the children of Mudear: “Some of [Emily’s] teachers grew to hate her for her wild eyes and lip biting” (Ugly Ways 12). Teachers openly ridicule Mudear in front of her daughters, for failing to come to conferences, and other mothers in the grocery stores with their children never bother to look around before blasting Mudear’s actions as a mother (61). Rather than feel sorry for what Mudear’s children and Ernest must be experiencing, as the only ones who see and speak with a woman who removed her self from society, they unfairly make them equal partners in Mudear’s isolation: “[...] instead of feeling sympathy for the girls who were held prisoner by their mother’s whims, the townspeople seemed to assume they had inherited Mudear’s idiosyncrasies and shunned them” (Taking After Mudear 54). Innocent they may be, but in the eyes of the community of Mulberry, the child follows the condition of the mother, who is guilty of the crime of an African-American mother rejecting archetypal motherhood and making the Choice.

For, despite the fact that Mudear was raised in the town like other African-American woman and bore children in the town much like them, she is not a part of them; because of her Choice, Mudear owes her children, her family, and her community nothing. Unlike Big Mama, with strong sense of African spirituality and balance, she does not feel that she has a stake in her community, or her family, for that matter. As Betty agonizingly tells Mudear’s corpse: “[...] Mudear, the only person you ever thought of was yourself, the only person. And Mudear, that was wrong. God, that was so wrong. ‘Cause you can’t live in this world like that. Not and not crush every thing you breathe on and touch and claim to love or give birth to” (Ugly Ways 269). However heartfelt Betty’s
outpouring of emotions may be, it does not change the fact that Mudear does crush her children emotionally, without the slightest bit of care that she does so. In fact, in her heart and mind, Mudear is bereft of children; they simply draw too much away from her own pursuit of total self-fulfillment, so their feelings do not matter. She simply cannot wrap her mind around any one thing or person being of greater importance than her.

Regardless of what her children or all of Mulberry thinks, says, and does—despite the fact that her children are fully innocent and guilty of the offense of association with a Whistlin’ Woman, Mudear is still the primary person of interest in her life. As Mudear ponders the choices that her own daughters make in life, especially with regards to her choices as a mother, she unapprovingly decides, “[…] they may be my daughters, but they can kiss what I twist and I don’t mean my ankle and I don’t mean my wrist” (Taking After Mudear 62). Mudear cannot and will not give herself to another or their feelings, including any children that, haplessly, she may have brought into the world. They are merely casualties in a war between Esther Lovejoy as an African-American Archetypal Big Mama and the community whose expectations and suppression were, perhaps, simply too much. As her husband and community are the ones who created the choking atmosphere of expectation, Mudear is forever counter to their advice; she cannot give any energy or concern to the community and what it thinks of her Choice.

Such “mothering” is so contradictory to what African-American Archetypal Big Mamas do for their children; they give their community, family, and children all of themselves. Yet, in the world of the Whistlin’ Woman, her behavior is guiltless; she feels that she is not to blame. She is a woman changed by a system of rules in the lore that expect her to be unquestioningly committed to her family and her community, sacrificing herself for their betterment. In attempting to be free of her mule-dom, Mudear tips the
scale of the motherhood to the other extreme—she now has no inner compass, no sense of morality or spirit to gauge her profound Choice or her actions. Annie Ruth questions her, in death, about her Choice: “Was being free, like you always said, Mudear, was that the most important thing? Being free. Shit, what did that mean? Did it mean you were free to hurt us, your own children, to abandon us? To cut yourself off from the world and put the burden of survival, and ours, too, on us?” (Ugly Ways 268). The burden is too great for her children; she wounds them indelibly. Therefore, instead of being a powerfully spiritual woman like the African-American Archetypal Big Mama with the power to heal, the Whistlin’ Woman’s spirituality becomes supplanted and replaced with self-worship and spiritual imbalance—seemingly impenetrable swords of protection against what others may think or feel.

Being so out of sync with her family, community and universe, Mudear cannot conceptualize the spiritually cogent definition of good character. Accordingly, this Whistlin’ Woman’s inner formalization of good character is corralled; she is the only one in the ring, so she must then typify good character. While her small “big”-ness in the community’s eyes isolates her from them, her dearth of spirituality and personal definition of what good character means keeps her there. To Mudear, good character for a woman entails the commitment to the Choice to be a solitary figure; it is the fundamental tenet of her religion. She further believes that duplication of her Choice is the only path to freedom for women—it is what makes her life “made in the shade” (39). As such, a woman holds the power to heal her own situations if she would only subscribe to Mudear’s philosophy about life and relationships: “I tried my best to make them free. As free as I could teach them to be and still be free myself” (34). For Mudear, being free
means that no one else in the world is capable of loving her as much as she loves herself, so she teaches her daughters that love is a fallacy, except when directed inwardly:

I tried to show them how freeing it is to discover that and really live your life by that [...] ‘That man don’t give a damn ‘bout me.’ [...] To say that and know it ain’t got nothing to do with you, that that’s just the way a man is. And when it don’t hurt no more, then you free. Once you realize that about the person that you lay your head down next to every night, then you can move on to the other folk in this world who also don’t give a shit about you. (107)

In her world, Mudear is the only one worth caring about because no one else truly does care about her, which is why her best life, in her view, entails her being completely self-consumed.

With such power emanating from self, Mudear does not feel the need to heal, especially other women, as an African-American Archetypal Big Mama does: “I didn’t coddle ‘em and cuddle ‘em to death the way some mothers do. I pushed ‘em out there to find out what they was best in. That’s how you learn things, by getting on out there and living. They found their strengths by the best way anybody could: by living them” (37).

In “pushing” them, Mudear offers no support to her daughters; in her words and actions, she in fact injures the women closest to her, her daughters, for not making her Choice. As Annie Ruth remembers: “It’s not like you and me and Emily don’t know all the shit that’s fucking up our lives. Sure we know.[...] I certainly know none of us knows how to appreciate anything, knows how to find or even see joy in life ‘cause we didn’t never see that when we were growing up.[...] ‘I don’t take a vanilla wafer for granted.’ That’s what she used to say. But it was a lie. She took everything for granted. And didn’t give nothing
in return. All in the name of her freedom” (254). Mudear cannot give because it would
take away from herself—it would take away from her freedom. Also, in tandem with that
freedom, she cannot be concerned with what its consequences to others.

Mudear’s self-worship involves a strict refusal to acknowledge the consequences
of her actions upon the lives of her daughters or of anyone with whom she shares a
heritage. In an attempt to purge herself of some of the hurt that Mudear has inflicted upon
the lives of her children, Annie Ruth accosts Mudear’s body at the funeral home: “If it
hadn’t been for us bringing you the world, you would’na had a life! And you didn’t even
appreciate it. Even though you were there, you might as well have thrown us away like so
much trash. Even women who leave their babies in trash cans must think about them once
in a while” (268). Such non-care, blatant, unapologetic indifference hurts the daughters;
they each often wished that she would die or simply physically leave (Taking After
Mudear 37). Yet, despite her pronounced deficiency as a mother, Mudear has no
accountability and no regrets; she, in Whistlin’ Woman form, does not have respect for
those who came before her, even her own “Mudear.” Lack of esteem for the first Mudear
giving birth to her and lovingly raising her, as an African-American Archetypal Big
Mama, is not enough to drive Mudear from her comfort zone or her Choice: “Esther
always did think she was above the laws of God and man. Heck, that woman didn’t even
come out of the house to go to her own mother’s funeral” (Ugly Ways 10-11). Mudear’s
own mother, as described by Mudear, was a happy woman who loved caring for her
husband and child: “[…] She loved her family and her life and it just seemed to love her
back. We didn’t hardly have nothing. Daddy seemed to work hard, but I think we rented
our house all the time I can remember. But it didn’t seem to stop Mudear from seeming to
love life.[…] I just assumed I had inherited that knack from her naturally. You know, like
mother, like daughter” (179). Obviously, Mudear does not subscribe to the “like mother, like daughter” adage because even happy memories of a wonderful childhood are not enough to trigger respect for her own mother, even when she dies. Leaving the first Mudear behind, at her death, is a result of her inconsequential attitude towards any life other than her own.

In her view, the dead know nothing, and Mudear decides that the living are no better. She holds no special feelings towards her ancestors or of her own children and only attempts to claim her granddaughter Mae Jean for herself because her own daughters have failed miserably in becoming like her: “Now that lil’ one, that ‘Mae Jean,’ she take after her Mudear. None of my own girls ever did [...] no matter how independent they claim to be, they don’t really take after me” (Taking After Mudear 167). Mudear does not want Mae Jean because she is her granddaughter; she wants her because Mae Jean, new to the world, has the greatest potential to be formed and fashioned by Mudear in her own image.

As such, familial ties are nil because the Whistlin’ Woman does not accept how small she truly is with respect to the universe—she is her own universe. Such divergence from Africana spirituality causes the Whistlin’ Woman to seemingly go against the laws of nature for a mother, especially an African-American mother. Yet, what she is really deviant from is an archetype, specifically an African-American Archetype. For, without a doubt, inasmuch as the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is a spiritual healer connected to the metaphysical realm, her opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman, is almost indescribable because she has neither balance nor spirit.

Mudear’s life and later death are vehicles to fulfill her own pleasures, wants, and desires, and no one else’s, including her own children: “After her change, she didn’t care
about much of anything that didn’t directly affect her peace and comfort. Mudear didn’t care about the girls’ grades or schooling. She wasn’t concerned about their health, hygiene, or clothing. She ignored any talk of their fears, feelings, or fantasies. She didn’t care about their souls either” (Ugly Ways 223). She does not care about her daughters’ souls or anyone else’s souls for that matter because she is too busy filtering others out in the fulfillment of her Choice—in her view, no one cares about Mudear except Mudear (107). She is incapable of honoring those who came before her; she also does not even acknowledge the present, which stands before her in her daughters.

The only soul, if one is to assume that Mudear still has one (especially in the sense of African spirituality), is her own. Since she happens to be the figurehead of her own religion, Mudear is in excellent shape to be pleased; there is no higher power to answer to. As Emily aptly relays to her therapist, “Mudear doesn’t study any religion except the religion of Mudear. That’s what she believes in” (115). Mudear is the practitioner, preacher and deity of the Church of Mudear, of which she is extremely dutiful and devoted. Her complete public disconnect allows for total commitment to her own whims and thus always trumps the needs, wants, and desires of others. Oddly enough, because it is the only thing that they know, the daughters accept Mudear’s behavior before her death, in spite of how much she hurts them:

Mudear did some horrible things to them when were growing up. But it was never personal, the girls firmly believed. Mudear had made it clear over the years that she didn’t do anything, not since she had so easily gotten the upper hand with Poppa, because of somebody. She was just doing what the hell she wanted to do. If somebody got in the way, well, that was life. (118)
Thus, they believe, along with Mudear, that Mudear does not set out to hurt others—Mudear only sets out to fulfill herself. So, if people get in the way of that goal, they are inevitably injured; Mudear believes, as the daughters also come to believe, that her enormous capacity for human disregard is not her fault. Together with that fundamental precept of her religion is the fact that Mudear does absolutely nothing around the house that she does not want to; her only mandatory compulsion or mark of “religious” discipline is her practice of washing out her own panties each night (15).

Of course, Mudear’s daughters are marked by such a detachment; one would assume that motherhood is not only a physical condition, but also an emotional and psychological one: “It was as if Mudear were the deity of their lives and they the acolytes who kept the ceremonial temple fires burning with their resentful fascination” (Taking After Mudear 54). Any progeny, therefore, that have a direct connection with their mothers are also affected by their mother’s spirituality because in the end spirituality and the beliefs that stem from it are the barometers that regulate and govern a person’s life. As Annie Ruth admits, “I hear myself thinking while I’m talking sometimes, and I realize I’m still editing myself according to what I think Mudear might think. Sometimes, I don’t edit, I translate. And when I open my mouth, Mudear’s voice comes out. And I have to cover real quick for something real mean and evil I said” (Ugly Ways 256). Mudear’s Choice, therefore, is not just a personal decision because her actions directly affect her daughters and the ways in which they think, act, and relate to others. In choosing self first, she is also choosing others last, including her own children; in giving to her religion of self, Mudear ill-equip her daughters to function and interact with people.
Like the community of Mulberry, the Lovejoy daughters do not fully comprehend why Mudear's Choice means that she must drain the entire household of energy, peace and spirit. Yet, the problem began at home, with Ernest, Mudear's husband:

Sure, he had slapped her a few times after they were married a couple of years. But that was how things was then, he thought. Then, a man controlled his household, his wife, his family. Wasn't even no big to-do about it. Just a couple of taps really just to shut her up and let her know who was who and what was what. [...] That's how it was then, it was a way to rule your house. You said something and your woman did it. If she didn't you showed her that she better. (97)

Again, in the atmosphere completely fueled by her husband's total control, Mudear's foray into the world of spiritless-ness begins with the simple action of her paying a heating bill when her husband is unable to do so. Paying the bill with money that she squirrels away for years means that she has the right to say what will and will not be acceptable in her home; after all, this is what she sees and suffers from at the hands of Ernest. This "power," seen by Betty especially, is what makes her question Mudear, posthumously: "I remember how it was for you before, but did you have to go and be like him?" (269). Mudear not only becomes "like him," she eventually morphs into something altogether different. In taking unquestionable power from her husband, derived from nothing other than his gender, she becomes like him, but because of her gender, and the expectations that come with respect to Africana motherhood, Mudear becomes almost monstrous (as if it is acceptable for a man to be a tyrant but sick and twisted for a woman to be the same).
In paying that bill, Mudear illuminates one momentary inadequacy in her deified husband that compels Ernest to abdicate his dictatorship in the household; Mudear is simultaneously baptized into the religion of Mudear. The family becomes irrevocably altered the very evening that the bill it is paid when Ernest comes home from work and is instantaneously enraged to find that there is no dinner cooked for him or the girls, as protocol would have it to be. Angrily, he questions her for such disobedience. Especially in light of the fact that their baby daughter just got over a terrible cold and despite the fact that the heat has just returned, thanks to Mudear, he is under the incorrect assumption that he will still rule Mudear. However, the magnitude of her change and her new philosophy in life, which changes the lives of everyone in her house, is encapsulated in one calm, deliberate response: “I done et, and when I done et, my whole family done et” (206). She is now her family; she is now her only concern. Ernest and the girls no longer matter.

Mudear is a new woman whose sense of balance and of spirit is warped and centered on her own actuality. She is “pleased as punch” about her “courageous” act. It becomes her badge of honor, her impossible resurrection from the dead of which she shows reverence for by self-veneration: “I can’t help it, I got to laugh when I think of how I coulda gone on for years and years like I was if it hadn’t gotten so cold that winter.[...] It was like it was planned by some holy power or something.[...] But then, I always knew I was meant for something big in this life. I really did” (153). Her Choice is the greatest thing that Mudear ever accomplished in her life; it is world changing because in the change, she becomes the center of not only her world but of family’s as well.

In this chance, Mudear wagers her life and her existence, meaning her position in the home and her freedom. It is quite a gamble, for the odds of victory are stacked against her as an African-American woman with immeasurable demands placed upon her. Yet,
she “wins,” and the world shifts: Mudear finds herself on the other side of the looking

   glass, this time as the despot that her husband once was. Ernest, after all, treats Mudear
horribly for years. He begins their marriage by blaming and punishing her for his own
sexual insecurities that contrast with a woman with no inhibitions about intimacy: “He
knew that he was the first man she ever knew, ever to touch her in her private places. But
she came to lovemaking that first time as if she had been made for it[...]. She reveled in
her strong little body [...] and the first time she saw him naked she reveled in his too.[...]
He had let her examine him, but he didn’t like it. It was too much for him” (97). His
mistreatment continues with constant physical and mental abuse and often culminates in
his putting Mudear and the girls out of the house until they each beg—mother and
daughters—beg him to return (129). Mudear remembers her life before her reign:

   Oh, all that sweet talk and that little honeymoon period didn’t hardly last
no time. As soon as he got me, soon as we got married, it was like he was
mad all the time for what I was. Don’t ask me why. Don’t ask me to
explain it. It was just some more a’ that crazy man shit as far as I could
see. If I knew how to do something better ‘n him, he got mad. If I won at a
game of Tonk, he got mad. If I cooked good pork chops for dinner, he got
mad. If I seemed to be enjoying myself in bed—with him, mind, you—he
got mad. (Taking After Mudear 60-61)

   In short, Ernest deserves his nickname “Mr. Bastard,” which is what Mudear calls
him behind his back before her change (Ugly Ways126). Ernest is such a tyrant before
her change that Mudear warns the girls of his impending arrival with the proclamation,
“Fire in the hole!” as if he is a living, breathing, unpredictable explosive (128). In this
atmosphere of fear and degradation Mudear simply waits for her opportunity to be free
from her tormenter: “Mudear had waited for this time, this contradictory, kiss-my-ass
time. She bided her time and waited. If she had been a praying woman, she would have
prayed for that time to come. But since she wasn’t she had just trusted in the irony of life
and waited” (130-131). Mudear is neither in life nor in death a praying or spiritually-
balanced woman, so her belief in the power of self comes when she seizes upon
opportunity and Choice. In assuming the role of provider, often synonymous with
persecutor, especially in the case of Ernest before her change, Mudear has her revenge,
like a woman “done wrong” by her man. Yet, instead of killing her man outright as
Frankie of the Frankie and Johnnie ballad does, Mudear opts to stay and steadily kill him
slowly with her cruel words, looks of disgust, and seemingly complete indifference as to
whether or not he lives or dies.\footnote{She makes little of everything that Ernest attempts to do
for his family financially, without the slightest bit of gratitude:}

Esther could make little of just about anything, Ernest would think after
she had silenced him with one of her disdainful remarks. He was proud of
his house, nicest one anyone in his entire family had ever dreamed of
living in. But nice didn’t seem to mean nothing to Mudear. She took nice
for granted, then hocked and spat on it. That’s how Poppa had felt around
his wife for the last thirty years or so of his life. Spat on.” (Taking After
Mudear 89)

Each day Ernest grows weaker, as the once unquestionable leader of the home, as Mudear
simultaneously grows stronger, as the tiny little usurper of his power.

Subsequently, Mudear’s husband may “need” her; her children may “need” her,
but Mudear decides that what she needs is more important, and what she needs is to be
left completely to her own devices; she is
[a] woman who spent most of her day lying in her throne of a bed or in a reclining chair or lounging on a chaise lounge in pretty nightclothes or a pastel housecoat. Doing nothing with her time but looking at television, directing the running of her household, making sure her girls did all the work to her specifications. Then, if she felt like it, some gardening at night. She did nothing else. Nothing, that is, but wash out her own drawers each night after everyone else had gone to bed. (Ugly Ways 15)

Therefore, as former caretaker of the family, Mudear simply lets her family members' human necessities go; as former caretaker of the home, she lets the household duties go, allowing that the family she leaves behind pick up the slack:

[...] at first Mudear hadn’t dumped everything in the house on her girls. She just, bit by bit, let go of what she didn’t feel like doing. And the girls picked it up. [...] But over the months after Mudear’s change, these simple duties she chose to perform became less and less frequent with all the girls taking up the slack Mudear left. Until the time when everybody in the household seemed to look up and discover that Mudear didn’t do a damn thing in the house. (208)

In Mudear’s world she sits high above her subjects, delegating not only the daily upkeep of the household, but also, and more importantly, she delegates the supernal health of her family in making herself into a careless, loveless center of their universe:

“She certainly knew how to ‘delegate’ work if not authority. She was the original ‘delegator’” (62). Such an abrupt end to a seemingly workable existence (for everyone but Mudear) has a devastating effect on her family, especially her very young children; it
is especially so when one considers that fact that after her change, she never gives their feelings any consideration.

As such an emotionally slipshod entity, Mudear just does not think about her family any more than giants consider insects. Mudear’s conscious decision to choose herself over her family is well thought out—she had been thinking of a way out from under her cramped life for years. She fully knows that her family and her reputation will be sacrificed in deference to her own freedom, but in her mind, it is the only path to her own independence: “At first, when I made up my mind it was gonna be different, I had thought about just walking away. [...] But then, I thought, why should I leave something that was mine? [...] So I decided to stay in body. But to leave in spirit and let my spirit free. So that’s what I did. And I never did regret it, either” (105–106). While she may not have regrets, Mudear has a mountain of hurt to answer to for her pronounced apathy; her daughters suffer terribly by the fact that they are completely and wholly “abandoned” by a mother who viciously chooses to continue to share nothing more than living space with them: “And as they put their hands to the oars and took on the tasks at hand, they felt themselves placed in a leaky rowboat and set adrift like three little abandoned sailors. For that’s what they were: abandoned” (Taking After Mudear 37). After all, worse than her making herself into a deity, sans regrets, is the impact that it has on her children. As Annie Ruth angrily vents to her dead mother, “Mudear, I don’t give a fuck about your freedom. And I know that that don’t matter to you ‘cause we don’t matter to you. But look at you now Mudear, you dead and gone and free, I guess. But look at what you left us all here with. You left us here with your garbage to tote around” (269). The depth of that abandonment, of being disposable is disturbing not only because every human being needs love, but also since the first person to love a child, archetypically speaking is the
mother (especially the African-American Archetypal Big Mama). Being deserted by one’s mother relegates a child into the hopeless depths of being unloveable; mothers are supposed be the exemplar of unconditional love in familial relationships. Yet, for all of their lives, the Lovejoy daughters question what love truly means because their first love, their mother, broke with them.

As such, an atmosphere of unrequited love attempting reconciliation in the household forms, especially in Mudear’s daughters. Subsequently, Mudear creates a sort of forced discipleship and following among her family members, despite the fact that they are unwilling subjects who as a result of her dogma become ill equipped to absorb traditional spirituality or even religion for that matter. The “god” in their home taught them that the God of the world was a falsity. In speaking to her psychiatrist, Emily attempts to describe her mother’s views on traditional religion: “Religious? Hell, she ain’t even superstitious. She doesn’t believe in anything. And if she did, she wasn’t afraid of anything. [...] Bad luck? She’d say, ‘Shit, you make your own luck in this world ’” (113). In Mudear’s myopic eyes, luck, spirituality, and religion are all relative terms, which are useful only with respect to how she is able to spin the definition for her own benefit. Not only is there no God to community relationship in her mind, in traditional Africana worldview fashion, but also there is no God-to-individual relationship either. Mudear, as deity, is the only entity worth pacifying, and better yet, satisfying, so such a thing as Christianity is simply irrelevant:

[...] she certainly doesn’t live her life according to any Christian tenets. Nobody would call her religious. [...] Mudear doesn’t study any religion except the religion of Mudear. [...] she used to make fun of people who believed. You know, really believed in God and a Supreme Being and a
higher purpose other than themselves. She used to say, 'Shit, niggas eat fish off the Bible.' Mudear made selfishness a religion. (115)

Mudear has to discredit all other forms of religion and spirituality as false doctrine if hers is to be acceptable, even in her own eyes. She also must make such "false doctrine" laughable or unbelievable if her religion of selfishness is to be honored. As absurd as her philosophical canons might be to others, it is a doctrine that is made manifest in a woman who is dedicated to herself and who has a family dedicated to the impossible task of attempting to appease her. While their endeavors inevitably fall short, it is because the primary creed in Mudear's religion is that she is only thing in life worthwhile, worth her time, energy, or care.

Because of Mudear's unwavering allegiance to self-fulfillment, her daughters and husband fall into her brand of conformity, facilitating her doing nothing in the house, save instilling fear and uncertainty as well as ensuring that their lives revolve around her wishes, desires, movements, and non-movements. As Ernest admits to his daughters, "Shoot, you all spoiled Mudear rotten. I guess we all did" (Ugly Ways 170). However Mudear feels determines the atmosphere of the house; the inhabitants, her husband and children breathe her in as if she dictates through the air and the atmosphere of the home how they should think, feel and exist. If there were ever sunny days in the home, when they felt, at least briefly, loved, perhaps Mudear's "freedom" would be worth all that she does to them. In truth, they do share the occasional moment when Mudear feels closest to them and that is when they are harshly talking about other people. As Mudear recalls, "Those are the times I felt closest to my girls. Us all sitting all around talking 'bout people" (238). Yet, in the cruel climate of the Lovejoy home, there is generally but one type of weather—rain, which is sometimes torrential and oftentimes just a light
sprinkling. Nonetheless, each shower freshly washes away any hopes of "normalcy" or even the feeling of being loved and accepted.

Mudear is the spiritual architect of the home, and everyone goes along with her skewed plan without any true dissention, so Mudear feels as if she is doing a good job. Certainly, her daughters talk about Mudear in a less than flattering light amongst themselves, but it neither causes them to rebel nor does it cause Mudear to change her ways; giving their thoughts even the slightest consideration goes against her guiding principle of "self first." After her death, Mudear hovers over her daughters' heads as they angrily vent over her cruel treatment. Her conclusion about their anger exemplifies how little she knows or cares about them: "You would think them girls were mad at me for something" (38). In fact, in her mind, because they did not completely take after her way of life, she feels that she is the one who should be disappointed with them because of her matchless influence on their lives: "I have always tried very hard not to judge my girls too harshly. For one thing, everybody ain't me. [...] I guess you can’t completely blame the girls because they don’t know what their Mudear has done for them. Practically all their lives—to show them a good example" (39). To Mudear, the daughters should be ashamed when they had maternal perfection before them all their lives, a woman who actively and, to a certain extent, successfully resisted African-American Archetypal motherhood: "The one thing in life that they could always look to with pride, a mother who set an example of being her own woman, was the thing that everyone wanted them to be ashamed of" (34). So, Mudear is fully aware that her daughters suffer as a result of her Choice; she just is extremely disappointed in her daughters for not taking after her and becoming their "own" women like her. Mudear’s form of "mothering" is so egregious because it means that she can go only so far with respect to her daughters; first
and foremost she still has to remain free herself: “Taught them how to carry themselves. How to keep that part of themselves that was just for themselves so nobody could take it and walk on it. Tried my best to make them free. As free as I could teach them to be and still be free myself” (34). Mudear believes wholeheartedly that her actions are justifiable because she believes that she is deity. Inasmuch as some believe that the Creator made the human race in order to be worshipped, Mudear believes that in making herself into her own woman, as the new Creator of the household she, too, should be worshipped.

One would suppose that assuming the role of the supernatural would be difficult, especially if a more traditional definition of spirituality that goes along with that title is recognized and affirmed in actions. For Mudear, there is no difficulty at all; as long as a person’s definition of spirituality neatly coincides with her own personality, all will be well. Mudear does not have to believe in the sanctity of any religion or spirituality but her own, which is why she has no problem behaving in such a spiritually blasphemous manner: “[... ] at times she saw herself as a very fervent, spiritual person. But actually she’s the most carnal person we knew.[... ] ‘Standing on the battlefield holding hands with the Lord.’ What a thing to say and not really believe it.[... ] Mudear doesn’t feel she has to hold hands with anybody for strength or anything else for that matter” (114). Mudear does not need strength from any other source other than herself as she is the repository of power. Further, she does not need a Bible to instruct her in the ways of life when her life is perfection defined: “[... ] she never went to church and she hasn’t looked at a Bible since she went to Sunday school. I think she used to go to church when she was a girl. But you can tell by the half-assed mean way she quotes scripture that she wasn’t paying attention” (114). Mudear’s only purpose for using quotes from the Bible or Christian tenets is when they “enhance” her state, to fit her mood, to prove a point about her own
grandiosity and why she should be worshipped, or to simply reinforce how little she cares for her daughters' well being. As Emily recalls,

If she hear me and Annie Ruth and Betty bitching about her 'round the house, she'd call us into where she was laying up in her bed or on her La-Z-Boy and tell us, 'Daughters, when your mother and father abandon you, then the Lord will take you up.' Then, she'd go back to doing what she had been doing before just like we weren't in the room.(114)

If the Lovejoy daughters liked it or not, accepted it or not, Mudear will not be moved from her self-constructed pedestal.

No one else on the planet, alive or dead, even comes close to such perfection, including the sweet, original Mudear, Esther's mother:

I always told my girls to just 'stand on the battlefield' and things would get better.[...] I was just talking words I had heard my own Mudear say when I was a child and in trouble.[...] My mama was a religious woman. Not like them fake Christian women who claimed to be my friend until I decided to live my own life. But a true Christian woman-hearted woman. Shoot, she'd give you the house dress off her back if you needed it. Heh! I don't take after her no kinda way. (Taking After Mudear 167)

Mudear knows that she is nothing like this truly spiritual woman and while Mudear recognizes the difference between true Christianity and the religion of Mudear, she still comes to the conclusion that her way of life is better. Rejecting the African-American Archetypal Big Mama's role is the better Choice for her. While she is aware of her own Mudear's usefulness as a spiritual woman to her family and community, the church of self—of Mudear—is much more gratifying to her. She is conscious that her mother fit
neatly into the expectations of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and that she, herself, is completely divorced from it. She must be because the distinction is what keeps her spirituality and religion viable. Such thoughts of continuity of self, of self-preservation, is what leads her to become interested in the baby Mae Jean, in that she could possibly manipulate another woman child to become like her (especially since her daughters fail to live up to her heights of doing nothing for others). Such interest is not to be confused with some semblance of respect for bloodline; Mudear is interested in the continuation of her own tyranny. Spiritually aware not only because of the caul that she was born with, but also because she is new to the earth, baby Mae Jean does not completely accept Mudear. Mae Jean thinks to herself, "[Mudear] don’t seem to fit in this family at all. Don’t none of us seem to take after her at all"(235). Mudear’s off-center nature is so distinct that even a two-day-old baby with no “voice” knows that something about Mudear’s spirit is wrong and so unlike the women who truly love her, her mother and her aunts. As she thinks to herself, “I know she want me to call her ‘Mudear,’ but I don’t like the sound of that for some reason. With her here, I know there gon’ be some drama up in here now” (258). Mae Jean senses that something in Mudear is amiss, but she can rest assured that her mother and aunts will always fight for her life to be different from the one that they knew as daughters. As Annie Ruth literally faces her mother, postmortem, she tells her,

Mudear, you’re not going to get our baby. Not this one.[...] You had your chance to be a mother. Three chances in fact. You don’t get another chance with my child. No, ma’am, I will fight you to the death, to my own death, on this one.[...] This is my child. My child! And I will kick your
dead ass over this one. Betty and Emily will, too. Even Poppa will fight you on this one. (275)

In fighting for what is best for Mea Jean, they are fighting for her opportunity to have a mother. While the Lovejoy daughters may be warring against the memory of a mother who nearly destroys them with her uncanny abilities in thought and action—of uncaring—it is a task worth taking up for Mae Jean. Such deep hurts are a consequence of a life with Mudear—a self-made goddess.

With Mudear’s twisted sense of religion and spirituality in that Mudear makes herself divine, the Lovejoy daughters face an uphill battle towards normalcy: “they never really believed it—‘God is good.’—not after Mudear changed and cursed their lives” (222). In cursing their lives by disposing of their needs—“shuffled aside, brushed aside like so much garbage” (Ugly Ways 266), the Lovejoy daughters fear becoming mothers themselves; Annie Ruth even fears that Mae Jean may be Mudear reincarnate before she is born: “Ever since she discovered she was pregnant, she had thought, feared even, that the child she carried, the little girl sleeping soundly upstairs could possibly be the avatar, the incarnation of Mudear. But she had refused to speak it. Even the thought of it was too much to consider” (Taking After Mudear 170). Mudear has so marked her daughters with her lack of love and care that the daughters are deadly afraid of that influence returning in themselves or their own children. However, the instant love and affection that the sisters have for little Mae Jean allow them to reconsider the curse of Mudear and work towards supplying the greatest blessing of their lives with something that they never had—a mother—they give her three. Not inconsequentially, three is a spiritually significant number because it represents a cord that is not easily broken. In realizing their own collective power of love, they find that they can defeat Mudear, even from beyond the
grave: “As long as we stick together, we’re more powerful than Mudear. We’re more powerful than she is alone, dead or alive” (242). In loving, motherly protection of Mae Jean, the Lovejoy daughters find strength to not “Take after Mudear,” but to take (ownership of their lives back) after Mudear.

Normalcy, therefore, is still within reach, despite Mudear’s draining of their souls during her life and attempting to steal the soul of her granddaughter in her death. After all, they have been starved of maternal affection for most of their lives, which leaves the daughters emotionally gaunt. However, they make the Choice to be counter to her influence: “[...] we know we crazy, like all of Mulberry think the Lovejoys are. But now we gonna work on happy and peaceful and appreciative and joyful.[...] After being with you for forty years, we got being a ‘ranting, raving maniac’ down pat. Now, we want to move on” (Ugly Ways 270). Inasmuch as an emaciated child can eventually recover with proper nourishment and care, despite the fact that she will always be scarred by the experience, so do the Lovejoy daughters have a chance at recovery from the lifetime of maternal famine.

For, in depriving her children’s souls of nourishment, Mudear also deprives them of Soul Food. From the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s example, feeding one’s family is much more than physical; so is not feeding them. More importantly, African-American Archetypal Big Mamas believe that being a good mother and a good cook feeds the physical and spiritual body. To many African Americans, Soul Food is, therefore, a tangible/intangible sustenance for an entire culture of people, given to them by the sustainer of the people, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. This precept is inherent in the African-American culture; not only does the historiography of Soul Food in the previous chapter explain its significance, but its essentialness is also relayed
in songs and play in the African-American community. In tunes such as “Juba” and “Just from the Kitchen,” for example, mothers (African-American Archetypal Big Mamas) in the songs desperately want to feed their children physically, while at the same time giving them a little bit of happiness to feed the spirit.6

The Whistlin’ Woman could care less about feeding her children or other children for that matter. Being filled to capacity with her delicacy of choice—herself, is her primary satiation. Even worse, the Whistlin’ Woman’s toxic selfishness acts as a vacuum to engulf the self-esteem of her family. She sucks them dry of any semblance of maternal love, leaving only skeletal fragments of self worth that they must try to piece together to be able to function as normal members of society.

In the Lovejoy family, the daughters learn very early on that Mudear not only deprives them of the desperately needed, essential vitamin of love, but also any other derivatives of caring associated with motherhood:

They never cried and pleaded for anything to Mudear. They had discovered early in life that those ploys, sincere or feigned, were useless with her after the change. She would tell them straight out, ‘Don’t be coming bothering me with that little petty stuff. Fix it, forget it, or get over it yourself.’ Even when a sudden thunderstorm came up and awakened the girls in the middle of the night, they knew better than to go crying to Mudear. She always slept through the worst storms.[…] The girls would just have to close their eyes, put their pillows over their heads, and try to go back to sleep. (183)

Thus, all things filling to the soul ordinarily showered upon the children of African-American Archetypal Big Mamas have to come from within their very limited
Lovejoy sister circle: “After the change, the girls finally figured Mudear didn’t care what they did. So, they did what they did—attended school plays, ironed clothes, kissed boo-boos, praised good report cards—for each other” (223). They do their very best to fill each other with praise as a substitute for what they wanted from their mother; of course, Mudear never truly praises her daughters because she is in the business of disregarding them.

When Mudear is finally absent in body, one would think that Mudear’s emotional suction of her daughters’ lives has also ended, but it does not. The grave is not powerful enough to eradicate the individual storehouses of self-doubt that she has given her daughters all of their lives. In fact, Mudear’s only other legacy to her children is her mountainous inheritance of indifference towards their existence. Hence, Mudear’s death is one avenue for the women to experience their mother’s departure, at least corporally. Yet the double edged-sword of Mudear is that her posthumous influence and hold on their lives leave them feeling even more bereft than when she abandoned them as girls long ago: “It wasn’t that they mourned for Mudear as much as they feared the absence of her, the lacuna they knew her absence would leave in their lives” (18). Try as they might to think or talk about anything than Mudear, even after her death, they are left without a reasonable substitute for “Mudear’s presence, as always, was too strong” (20). A steady diet of non-mothering, personally fed to them by Mudear, created women with differing forms of obese self-doubt.

As the oldest child, Betty recalls the most about how it was to have a “normal” mother in African-American Big Mama fashion, who made rolls which were seemingly naturally sweet, “not with sugar you put in but sugar that’s just there” and melted in the mouth (135-136). This memory of sweetness, of Soul Food, lingers because it is wholly
opposed to the image of Betty having to feed herself and her sisters. Thus, the sweet
memory is attached to that of being left behind by her mother, discarded and hungry, and
having to make sandwiches of graham crackers and bologna, which were the only things
that her small arms could reach (206). She becomes the rock for her sisters, the “Ishmael”
who relays stories of an average life, which sound more like fantasy to her younger
siblings than any reality that they know (28). Betty is the only daughter to vividly
remember the clear cut difference between the mother who was much more like the
African-American Archetypal Big Mama than the Whistlin’ Woman. Perhaps this is a
blessing because throughout her storytelling, the mirage of a traditional family seems to
be within reach for the Lovejoy daughters; perhaps it is also a curse because like a
mirage, as far the Lovejoy women believe, such customary mothering and family life is
fleeting at best, and not real. It certainly is not the reality that Mudear’s daughters grow
up with. As such, Betty’s life as the rock, rather unshaky in and of itself, is not without
consequence. As much as Betty makes Mudear out to have been a good woman at least at
some point in their lifetime, she, too, is the most familiar with the cruel, unforgiving
mother, who sees Betty as little more than the “big boned” work horse: “All her life,
Mudear had called Betty ‘big-boned,’” despite the fact that she was only slightly taller
than her sisters; [...] as with most things, she couldn’t shake Mudear’s image of her [...] [
It] always overwhelmed her own self-image” (27). “Big-boned” and willing to work, to
take up Mudear’s slack is the way that Betty comes to see herself as well.

Betty does her best to keep up appearances, at least on the outside in the town of
Mulberry, and while Mudear’s influence is seemingly watered down in the public
eye, Betty knows full well that it is never exhausted within:
Keeping half a dozen bubble balls in the air while making the outside world think that everything was okey-dokey was something at which Betty excelled. She had done it most of her life. However, like all the Lovejoy sisters, whether they were in their parents’ house in Georgia or three thousand miles away in California, Betty felt as if she were in shackles all the while she performed that sleight of hand. (Taking After Mudear 52)

The bubble game is what Betty teaches her sisters, which is part of why they are so successful in their professional lives. As much as she tries to protect her sisters from the past, present, and later posthumous influence of Mudear, Mudear still has been given the lion’s share of her daughters’ psychological development. Her non-nutritional regime of carelessness affects each of her children differently; each has a different seed and subsequent plant of destruction that grows from within.

Emily’s inner destruction is the most outwardly expressed for her compulsive behaviors, or what Betty deems to be flirting with insanity (Ugly Ways 12), run the gamut—from mercilessly biting her lip to tapping her foot five times before she enters a large doorway, to cupping her breast in her hand: “It never dawned on Emily she had been doing these routines so long, touching a curl in the front of her hair five times, brushing down the hairs of her right eyebrow five times before checking a file, that they seemed part of her makeup, not some alien neurotic compulsions. Just how Emily was” (64). She is known as the craziest Lovejoy sister, but this title does not bother her. Rather, she embraces it because it is what anchors her to Mulberry; craziness is her identity. For example, she looks forward to her weekly appointment with her psychiatrist:

Her job with the state didn’t carry the excitement of television broadcasting like Annie Ruth’s or of power and entrepreneurship like
Betty’s, but the insurance offered government employees made it possible for her to visit a psychiatrist with no set time limit. And after her first visit, she was hooked, looking forward all week to her Monday late morning appointment. [...] [She was] seemingly brimming over with talk of Mudear and her own life and her dreams and questions. She could hardly hold herself together until she sat on Dr. Axleton’s tweed nubby pile sofa. (116)

Acceptance of such delineation is quite telling, for while each of the members of the Lovejoy family has an equal stake in claiming the greatest harm done to them by Mudear, Emily’s pronounced hurt stems from the fact that she is the one who most craves her mother to be something that she is not. In fact, she still sees flawlessness in Mudear: “Mudear had always reminded Emily of an old blues singer [...] tough, capable, and knowing with beautiful skin and gold hoops in her ears” (109). However, viewing Mudear in such a light never stops Mudear from being Mudear. Even as a teenager, when Emily attempts to use all sorts of creams and ointments to tend to her “bruised teenaged face” (109), Mudear crushes her daughter’s already fragile self esteem, telling her,

Even when I first started my period, I never had so much as a pimple’ [...] ‘I think that stuff just make it worse. Make your face look like a potato grater,’ Mudear would add as she wiped herself dry and walked out of the family bathroom without washing her hands. ‘That cream is lighter than your skin daughter, now everybody can see just how bad your face looks. You look like a dough-face. (109-110)

Dining from the table of Mudear, what is uttered lightly from Mudear’s lips lands a lifetime of hurt on her daughter’s heart. Emily is, as a result, extremely sensitive to the voice that “drained her daughters and husband of any routine pleasure” (Taking After
Mudear knows this, which is why she uses that voice from the grave to try and convince Emily to name Mae Jean after Mudear and to put Mae Jean’s caul in Mudear’s garden (153-157). To her very core, Emily feels misunderstood and unlovable because while she unequivocally heeds the voice of her mother, her efforts are never enough; orders and feelings of failure are all that Mudear sustains Emily with.

Such inadequacy alienates Emily from her own sisters, at least in her own mind, and as a result, she often seeks seclusion. For reasons that she cannot understand, Emily is the daughter most enticed by the river. In longing for a mother so deeply, perhaps she is drawn to the pull of an African water mother deity Oshun because Emily’s perception and definition of motherhood is so incomplete (68). Not only is Emily missing and sensing motherhood in the river in Mulberry, heightened because of her personal great “loss” of her own mother, but also perhaps she is sensing that Mudear’s “good” attributes are most like Oshun. While Ansa is obviously aware of Yoruban deities, Emily’s character, like many African Americans, feels some familiarity with the natural and spiritual realm that she does not fully recognize. It makes sense that she would go to Oshun, not only for protection but also because, like Mudear, the only mother she has ever known, Oshun fully loves her existence, her life. Mudear certainly loves life, but she is missing the key Oshun attribute of also deeply loving and caring for humanity as well. For Emily, she only knows that the river “sp [eaks] life to her, but [that] it also summon[s] death” (68-69). Like her mother, the river has the potential to be both the sustainer and the taker of life. As Emily was never nurtured or sustained by her mother, at least as far as she can remember, Emily eventually plans on taking her life by drowning in the sacred depths of the river, perhaps in the hopes that she will finally drink of the sustaining power of motherhood. Perchance by drowning, she will at last be accepted in
the arms of a loving mother for all eternity, negating her slighted life as a child of Mudear.

Hence, Emily, of all of the sisters, is the most “alone and lonely. And that was a terrible way of being. It was and had always been what was driving her crazy. All of her good news, her good fortune seemed to fall flat because there was no one outside her sisters in her life to whom it made a difference. No one to share it with” (Ugly Ways 73). Conceivably such isolation from the community and to a degree within the safety bubble of her sisters is what makes Emily so upset when she finds out that Annie Ruth is pregnant. For, while the sisters love to hear stories about each other’s most recent sexual escapades, even going so far as to compete for the most outrageous story, the thought of pregnancy sickens Emily. She is afraid for any of the Lovejoy sisters to become a mother, and the fact that she aborted her own child, coupled with the unbreakable vow that the sisters made as teenagers makes the thought of Annie Ruth having a baby unacceptable:

Since they were all little, the sisters had made pacts with each other that were as binding as the religious vows of innocent, virginal novitiates.[...] When Betty was ten, Emily eight, and Annie Ruth five, they had stood in the family’s backyard [...] and swore that they were would be friends for life and never need outsiders, who thought they were as strange as their reclusive mother [...] they [...] vowed never to work like slaves in a garden when they were adults and out of their Mudear’s clutches [...] and seven years later, as teenagers sitting cross-legged on the floor.[...] they shyly joined hands and made the one pledge that had grown to hinder them the most [...] I’ll never be a mama [...] That way we’ll never be like Mudear. (Taking After Mudear 34-35)
To Emily, her whole life is about being ignored and betrayed; it is the one steady meal of both her childhood and adulthood. The blow of her sister’s pregnancy is even more arresting because a sacred vow is broken by her sister, one of only two other partners to partake from the same platter of a lifetime of pain. For, despite the gravity of the sisters’ well-meaning pledge to save the life of another innocent not yet born, Annie Ruth becomes pregnant, and she intends to keep the baby.

As the current Lovejoy “baby,” Annie Ruth is the most successful in the sense of professional prominence. She is also the most significant as an agent of change in her family, as Africana lore typically ascribes to the youngest of three. Annie Ruth dares to go against the promise that the sisters make to avoid becoming the monster that Mudear is and instead opts to have a baby, despite her fears that her baby will be “Mudear incarnate” (170). Annie Ruth, unlike Emily, is only a bit more adept at covering her mental state, but a few weeks before Mudear becomes mortally ill, she begins to see cats when there are none (Ugly Ways 83). This is no coincidence, for one because the only act of motherhood that Mudear ever showed towards Annie Ruth, as far as she knows, is when Mudear saves her from being clawed to death by a cat that gets into her baby crib and scratches her throat: ‘[…] it’s a damn shame the best you can say about your mother is that she killed a cat for you once” (85). Also, it the metaphor of a cat that Mudear uses as a point of reference for her most horrible thoughts: “Shit, craziness is hanging around this damn house like a hungry cat smelling fish!” (86). Mudear, of course, is clueless as to why her daughters are “crazy;” she refuses to look in the mirror and take a good look at what her actions are doing to her daughters. If anything, she sees them as being weak and incapable, “trifling” women who are not comfortable in their own shoes because they are not like her (14). Of Annie Ruth’s nervous breakdown, she asks herself, “What she
got to break down about?” (14). To Mudear, Annie Ruth has no reason to break down, to be crazy. Yet, crazy or not, Mudear chooses the form of a cat to come back from the grave and haunt her daughters in her relentless quest to win Mae Jean for herself. She is sorely mistaken in thinking that the cat, which runs around in the attic, Mae Jean’s crib, and Mudear’s garden will cause Annie Ruth to break again. Although she lives a lifetime without a mother, when Annie Ruth gives birth to Mae Jean and becomes a mother herself, Annie Ruth's concepts of motherly love—via the love that she has for her own daughter—causes her to re-examine Mudear as the destructive force of anti-motherhood with respect to her own life. She faces her greatest fear manifest in Mudear who is wrapped in the horribly disturbing cloak of a cat: “[...] you ain’t gon’ get no ‘second chance,’ with my child [...]”, Annie Ruth tells her when Mudear makes her specter seen. Mudear is surprised that Annie Ruth has grown to be so resolved against her mother: “Mudear looked her youngest daughter up and down, taking in this new woman who stood steadfast between her own mother—who now favored a cat—and her own child” (275). Out of the disparaging picture of motherhood that Mudear is, Annie Ruth is also resolved into thinking how she will be the opposite of the monster that she remembers and comes to believe that Mudear was from their births: “Annie Ruth had spent so much of her life thinking of Mudear as some kind of monster, ‘The Anti-Mother,’ that she couldn’t for the life of her imagine Mudear being gentle and kind and maternal toward anyone least of all her daughters, even as she had nursed one of them” (147). Mudear, the “Anti-Mother,” nursed her children all for their lives with a steady stream of inadequacy. Yet, as it was all that they had, a void is left in their lives when Mudear dies. Emily makes the Choice to be different from Mudear; when she sees little Mae Jean and falls in
love with her, she knows that things are distinctly different between that mother and daughter. Her relationship with Mudear, by contrast, was merely one of survival:

Emily felt she could sum up her and her sisters’ relationship to Mudear best by quoting a scene from a movie she had seen on TV about a former Air Force pilot, a survivor of a Vietcong POW camp. He told how his captors used a torture device that tied him up with his hands bound behind him and suspended him from a rope that intensified the excruciating pain in his arms the longer he hung from the ceiling. As he demonstrated a replica of the device he kept in his garage, he was asked how does one survive that kind of daily torture. The former Vietnam POW replied, ‘You learn to love the rope.’ It was how she and the girls felt about Mudear. Regardless of her abdication of responsibility as mother, Mudear was, as she reminded them from time to time, still their mother. Some respect was due her, for not throwing herself down a flight of steps when she was pregnant with each one of them. (Ugly Ways 119)

Survival is generally not the word used to describe the relationship between children and their mothers, especially for the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, but as their experience was with a Whistlin’ Woman, survive is what the Lovejoy daughters did; it is a more than fitting descriptor of their lives with her. For that—the fact that they did survive, Annie Ruth is proud: “Hell, we ought to be proud we still alive and just slightly crazy” (257). Yet, Mudear’s daughters are not the only ones in the household “holding the rope,” attempting to survive and stave off imminent death by their malnourishment of love.
Ernest Lovejoy is perhaps the most changed by Mudear, after her Choice, despite his relatively low-key existence in the household. His daughters certainly ignore him—he is not even an equal victim with them so much as a bystander or witness to a horror. Yet, the strong character presence that Mudear is, even in death, is due in large part to her husband Ernest: “Ernest, you taught me that, don’t care ‘bout nothing that don’t care ‘bout you” (Taking After Mudear 86). While, arguably, he is not to blame for making her so completely removed from reality and the upbringing of her children, Ernest is at least to blame for making Mudear feel as if she has no other option to deal with being marginalized by her spouse, save walking away from her family (despite the fact that her family wishes on more than one occasion that she did) (36-37). Interestingly, there is an Africana folktale entitled “The Man Who Took a Water Mother for His Bride” which echoes the relationship between Ernest and Esther, in that the man, like Ernest, has quite a share in contributing to the wife’s decision to “leave.” In both tales, the wives were once in the role of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama; their men and their households flourished under their care. Also in both tales, male arrogance corrupted their emotional and physical prosperity, and the wives made the Choice to usurp their husbands’ oppression. In merely paying that bill, Mudear takes Ernest’s power and replaces it with an impregnated seed of self doubt that echoes in his psyche: that he really is not capable of being the traditional man—“provider and protector” of his family. Feelings of inadequacy as a man for having allowed his finances to become so out of order that his wife has to step in a pay a bill completely deflates his ego:

Maybe it was seeing her so capable, so able to take care of everything that was thrown her way. She never seemed to buckle, but rather to steel herself and go forward. He had to admit, it had scared him. He
remembered his twenty-two year old mind trying to take all of Esther in, even before the change, and being overwhelmed by the woman he married. (97)

What he suspected all along, perhaps, is Mudear’s inner strength. Ironically, it is probably what drew her to him when they were dating, caused him become cruel after they married, and made him succumb so easily to her new tyranny after her change.

In truth, with Ernest being a monster towards Mudear, Mudear acquired the necessary germs to become the biggest infection the house has ever encountered. The oppressed, Mudear, becomes the oppressor, and Ernest’s household is completely flipped: “It seemed that not so much about him was changed as much as things were around him” (126). For, instead of the meals and personal attention on demand that he would receive on a daily basis, with no more than a “rude gesture,” Ernest finds himself swimming against a mighty rush of water, struggling to keep his head afloat, struggling to survive what is to be a lifetime of punishment for his sins (Ugly Ways 128). Talking to Annie Ruth, he tries to explain, “Your mother, no matter what she was when she died, no matter how she ended up. She was a sweet girl when we met” (178). For Ernest, the hardest thing about accepting who Esther was before her change is the fact that he was once just like her: “I guess [...] I was like Mudear,’ he thinks to himself. From the great beyond, Mudear adds, ‘He’s damn right I was sweet when we first met. I couldn’t help but be sweet. I didn’t know no better. I was like my Mudear had been her whole life.[...] But that was before I came out from under that roof and found out how the world really was. Before I married Ernest’” (179). Ernest is the catalytic force in Mudear’s life; for whatever reason, Ernest is the first one in the union between the two who changes, which in turn plants the seeds of retributonal destruction in Mudear. She, too, remembers a
time, relatively newly married, when she “stopped getting any enjoyment out of food, all that delicious food” that she cooked in their old house (105). When food begins to taste like “wet cardboard […] wet and papery with a bit of paste thrown in,” Mudear realizes that she is becoming sick—not with a physical ailment, but sick of her life with Ernest and her family: “I found […] that it wasn’t my cooking, it was my life” (105). So when the opportunity presents itself, she makes the profound Choice and changes, and when she does, it forces a transformation upon Ernest. It is now her turn to commandeer his tyrannous reign and to the victor goes the spoils. In “victory,” she gives into her hedonistic desires, including her love of food, which not only returns but also becomes almost beastly in her consumption of it. For example, she relishes in eating tasty items like fresh collard greens as ill-mannered as possible, with her fingers, daring anyone to speak against her self-gratifying moments of pleasure, especially Ernest, who has certainly had more than enough days of satisfying both his wants and his needs, often at her expense (Taking After Mudear 222-223). So Ernest, more than anyone else, knows part of the “why” in Mudear’s makeover, which is also why he cannot “completely and finally hate her;” he even goes so far as to “admire some things about her after the change” (Ugly Ways 51). For, if Ernest were to completely hate her, he would be giving Mudear every last iota of power associated with his masculinity; with everything else that he has lost in his household, this is something that he simply cannot do: “He felt that was what she must have wanted all the time, all the time they knew each other. If she got him to really hate her, the way he knew she despised him, then she would have been satisfied. All Mudear wanted was to be in control” (162). Bruised, battered, and seemingly beaten, Ernest cannot relinquish that last bit of himself to Mudear, even in her death. Ernest
resolves himself to the belief that “He was in this alone” (50). Perhaps his solitude, as a consequence of his former behavior, is well deserved.

Ernest is, after all, a man who was well fed by the power of his fist upon his woman; after Mudear’s Choice, he has only one little bit of himself left—his Choice to either completely hate her or not. She will not scrape and consume that last little trifle from his soul, like she does the collards that she cleans off of her plate. The succubus that Mudear is, Ernest knows that she would love to possess that last bit of him.

Yet, despite the fact that she takes from her family’s souls in life and in death, she does have something that she gives them in tandem with her acquisitions—her words of “wisdom.” Spiritually speaking, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama offers up her “Mama”-isms in an effort to instruct her children about the ways of life. Proverbs in particular are a form of education in Africana culture, which tell of mutual human respect, love and balance:

Proverbs [...] must not merely convey traditional wisdom, they must present it in a formulaic and memorable way [...] the use of proverbs works successfully in the folk community because its significance to the issue at hand is apparent enough that it persuades the person being addressed or the audience of the accuracy and legitimacy and traditional wisdom of its counsel. (Dance 454 –455)

The African-American Archetypal Big Mama, who is a frequent dispenser of such knowledge, generally doles out her wisdom in such a way that the hearers are exalted. This is completely counter to the Whistlin’ Woman’s form of verbal instruction. She thinks before she speaks, but it is with the intent to first do harm:
Mudear was like that. She had a knack for picking the exact moment when she could best deflate her daughters’ egos and joy with one swift comment. The woman’s philosophy concerning her daughters’ egos was the opposite approach she took with her husband Ernest and, in fact, with all men. With her daughters, it was hit ‘em while they high. With men, she believed, and drummed into her girls’ heads: hit ‘em when they low.’

(Ansai, Taking After Mudear 75-76)

For this Whistlin’ Woman, hurt feelings are not just a consideration; hurt feelings are seemingly the ultimate target for her darts of words.

By contrast, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s words may be hurtful at times, but even more, they are purposefully so, used only to provoke something positive. More importantly, the words are spoken from a place of safety and love, where the hearers know that whatever Big Mama says is for their own good. For example, a Big Mama may tell an adult child on the brink of becoming a financial leach that “It’s a mighty poor chicken that can’t scratch up her own food”; this aphorism is meant to provoke the response of survival, to push her/him into self-sufficiency. Mudear, on the other hand, was known to say “Root hog or die po’ ” when the more common expression is “Root little piggy or die!” (246). She changed the saying just enough to make the image a little more daunting and frightening; above all, the maxim comes from a person who does not care whether or not the advice is truly accepted. While the general meaning of the two proverbs is the same, the venom that comes with the curt wisdom of the Whistlin’ Woman is covered in a veil of coldness. So, while she may offer up proverbial sayings, and in Mudear’s case, her own sayings about how life should and should not be
lived, the knowledge contained therein is encased in a thick coating of indifference, the true opposite of love.

Additionally, the mantras that Mudear repeats over and over are instructive to an extent, but the intent and the delivery are ostensibly hateful. For example, one of Mudear’s most commonly repeated sayings is “Don’t let nobody steal your joy,” which is ironic, despite the fact that she says it “with deep feeling, verging on tenderness, as if she weren’t the grand-theft joy felon in the house” (41). She is the joy-stealer, in not only her actions of non-care but in her words. Clearly, as the first Lovejoy woman in the house, Mudear does not “love joy,” nor does she want her daughters to have joy. In fact, her key message running throughout all of her proverbs reinforces any self-doubts already pronounced in her daughters’ lives—she has already stolen their joy. Telling her daughters things such as “Wish in one hand. Shit in the other and see what you got” is another way of telling them that they will never acquire anyone or anything of value because they are nothing in her eyes (38). At best, what she is saying is that the worth of her daughters amounts to wispy aspirations and waste—which is what Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth are to Mudear. Worse than this message is the guilt that Mudear heaps upon the heads of her daughters in her proverbial non-African-American Archetypal Big “Mama-isms.” When Betty’s beauty salons become very profitable and she can no longer smoothly run her parents’ household, her own, and her thriving businesses, Betty hires someone to come and cook and clean for her parents. Rather than gratitude, Mudear utters a message of self-doubt for Betty to live with: “Well, daughter, if your conscience doesn’t condemn you, why should I?” (202). Betty’s act of kindness for her parents, something that she really does not have to do, (especially since both Mudear and Ernest are able bodied) is rejected, which means that Betty, too, is rejected. Rejection, not
acceptance, indifference, not love, is the only order of the day for Mudear and these are the only truths that comes through in what Mudear tells her daughters. The only time that the Lovejoy women can remember being told that they are loved, they are also made to feel as if that love is highly conditional at best: “I love you daughter, but I hate your ways” (251). While Mudear does not explicitly state that she hates her daughters in this dictum, she informs her that she hates the persons that they are, which is in effect saying the same thing as hating them. The fundamental message behind Mudear’s words certainly point in the direction of lovelessness and not support.

Because of such hurtful communication, the daughters find themselves craving advice, craving discipline—anything that would let them know that they have a mother in order to substantiate the first part of that ill-conceived phrase, that they are loved. They know full well that other daughters receive such guidance and that while many other young women may be flippantly disgusted with their mothers for being annoyingly cautious about what they do, the Lovejoy daughters are envious of such care, for these women at least have a mother who cares enough to be cautious:

Where the girls imagined most mothers imparting words of wisdom to smooth their daughter’s passage into womanhood—‘Don’t accept rides with strangers.’ ‘Don’t kiss on the first date.’ ‘Don’t drink anything at a party that you didn’t mix.’ ‘Stay in school.’—the Lovejoy girls knew their mother’s insights were merely tools to control them whether they were up under her at home where she reigned, or out in the world where she sent them. (147)
As women who grow up without such counsel that obviously comes from a place of concern, the Lovejoy sisters grow to feel insufficient, bumbling around in life because they felt unloved.

With no guiding light in a mother to help them find their way in the world, the Lovejoy daughters come to any relationships as fractured and incomplete individuals: "[...] none of us knows how to find or even see joy in life ‘cause we didn’t never see that when we were growing up" (254). Rather than caring about hurting their feelings or gauging her speech in such a manner that the hearer feels better about the medicine she is about to dole out, Mudear purposely shapes her speech to make her daughters feel less than adequate as women: “I told ‘em straight out. I never did talk down to my girls the way some grown-up folks do with children. I always talked to ‘em the way I expected them to be, women. And they understood me too” (Ugly Ways 106). Further, Mudear says,

I’d tell them right out what their best attributes were and what failings they didn’t even need to waste their time on trying to improve. I didn’t coddle ‘em and cuddle ‘em to death the way some mothers do. I pushed ‘em out there to find out what they was best in. that’s how you learn things, by getting on out there and living. They found their strengths by the best way anybody could, by living them. (37)

Such “guidance” certainly shapes her daughters, for they do, more often than not, feel derisory and insufficient with respect to interactions with other people. If this is strength, then it is strength at the expense of her daughters’ confidence. Mudear’s justification for her "wisdom" is truly that, a justification for her outwardly unforgivable actions. It would appear that the intent was well meant, especially since the Lovejoy women do turn out
successfully; the people of Mulberry often remark about how crazy Mudear is, despite the fact that she “raised” smart girls in spite of her own issues: “Esther Lovejoy may be a strange old heifer [...] but she sho’ did raise some smart girls” (Taking After Mudear 36). Interestingly, Mudear still receives the credit from the community for the successes of her daughters. However, knowing half of the damaging things that Mudear says to her daughters should force reconsideration for her would-be “praisers,” for Mudear cannot give her daughters a compliment without delivering a more devastating complaint:

“Emily you know you in that dress. And you look pretty in red [...] but you got a booger in your nose.[...] Just when you dressed up and think you looking cute, too” (Ugly Ways 220); or she’d tell a self-conscious Betty: ‘Daughter, take that brush and crack them pepper pods in the back of your head.’ Mudear made it sound as if the girls had cooties or lice. She couldn’t stand pepper pods” (220- 221). These are the “gifts” that she grants her daughters, the only “motherly endowments” or advice that she gives them—all of which are sheathed in cruelty.

One of the most difficult facts to absorb about all of Mudear’s wisdom is that her daughters often internalize and believe what she says, try as they might to resist it. They accept her advice, even to their own detriment: “Despite all the expense, effort, and time the three women all spent on their looks, their clothes, their hair, their makeup, their bodies, their skin, it still caught Betty by surprise sometimes to realize how attractive they all were. That was Mudear’s doing, Betty thought” (195). Even as the world sees the Lovejoy women as beautiful roses, they cannot see their own unique beauty. Even Mudear admits to herself only, in death, that they are beautiful: “[...] I ain’t nowhere as good-looking as them! I wouldn’t tell them that even if I could for nothing in the world” (Taking After Mudear 248). Of course, she could never admit or tell her daughters how
she feels because it would violate her pitiful "proverbial" wisdom. As a result, the daughters cannot see what others see or even what they see in each other—Betty cannot see what Cinque, her young lover sees in her; Annie Ruth does not take the time to think about what her countless lovers think of her, and Emily just wants to be loved, on nearly any terms by a man, but most especially by her mother: "I just always wanted a mama," she says to herself at Mudear’s [dead] feet (Ugly Ways 269). She must tell Mudear in death, for Mudear will not hear of it in life. Even if she did, it would, of course, be of no consequence to Mudear.

Unlike the African-American Archetypal Big Mama who wraps her advice in sweetness, the Whistlin’ Woman in Mudear wraps her sentiments in all things sour. For even in admitting to them that they are pretty, Mudear also lets them know that their beauty is not extraordinary; they are just one in a countless number: “ [...] Mudear had drummed it into their heads before any of them had gotten out of that ugly awkward preteen stage of life not to count on their looks in this world, ‘Pretty women, daughters, are a dime a dozen’ [...] my Mudear used to tell me, ‘Pretty is as pretty does. Beauty is a gift from God. But gift or no, pretty ain’t gonna get you where smart will’” (195-196). One might argue that in this proverb which Mudear repeats at length reflects a positive preference for her daughter’s education over their looks, but these words of righteousness are really words of ruthlessness. The “truth” of Mudear and her intentions is made clear here:

Mudear amended the truism for any locale and occasion.[...] ‘Pretty girls in a southern country church are a dime a dozen, daughter.[...] Pretty women in a southern country town are a dime a dozen, daughter.[...] Pretty women are a dime a dozen at a little country college daughter.[...]
Daughter, pretty women are a dime a dozen on Spelman College campus. [...] Pretty women sho’ ‘nough a dime a dozen out in Los Angeles, California daughter. (195-196)

Conceivably, Mudear is jealous of her daughters, which is why she attempts to instill this “truism” in them. In death, Mudear realizes just how much prettier they are than her, though she would never convey that reality to her daughters: “[...] I ain’t nowhere as good-looking as them! I wouldn’t ell them that even if I could for nothing in the world. Like I say, they all conceited as hell already. Besides, everybody know pretty women a dime a dozen on this earth” (Taking After Mudear 248). Despite this fact, the Lovejoy women, as beautiful versions of Mudear, never feel pretty, and they also never feel as if they are a part of anything or any group other than the fractured cult of Lovejoy women, founded and instituted by Mudear.

While the “Lovejoy women” is a private club complete with its own exclusivities, it is not one that any of them signed up for. Their unwilling recruitment is especially overwhelming in light of all of the proclamations about what Lovejoy women do and do not do; for Mudear has come up with a list of weaknesses and “attributes” which highlight two major codes of belief—her daughters’ self-sufficiency in the world and the “height” of being alone, without companionship. Mudear wants her daughters to believe in the non-existence of love and fulfillment in a relationship, which is what Mudear has with Ernest. Because her dreams of love are shattered, in Ernest’s marital domination rather than devotion, Mudear must reinforce what makes her “strong,” which is a marked detachment from love and loving: “Over the years, the list had grown into a type of mythology: ‘The Lovejoy Women.’ Mudear would start and the girls would join in as if they were reciting a mantra. Whenever Mudear caught the girls making light of ‘what
Lovejoy women do and don’t do,’ looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes when they didn’t think Mudear was watching, she’d smirk and say, ‘Well, there must be something to it. ‘Cause married or not, I notice all ya’ll still go by ‘Lovejoy’” (Ugly Ways 223). Whether or not they fit the bill of “strength” and “attributes” that Mudear has come up with in her list is of no consequence; by repeating this mantra over and over again, she hopes that one day they will absorb this knowledge about themselves, that one day they will become molded into Mudear’s own image. Mudear arms her daughters with these, her words, which are tools of her creation, which threaten to be their destruction. In Whistlin’ Woman style, she mocks and blames them for attempting to rid themselves of her advice and thoughts about what kinds of women will be. In her eyes, the only eyes that matter, they will never change—they will always be disappointing products of Mudear.

Unfortunately, Mudear’s noxious opinions not only seemingly seek to destroy her daughters’ feelings of validation as good, decent human beings, her “wisdom” ill prepares them for dealing with the opposite sex. In fact, what she tells her girls about themselves is first and foremost their own “faults;” second, she drills into their heads her belief about the utter untrustworthiness of all men, making them feel inadequate in trusting themselves or any male counterpart in matters of the heart. Thus, their knowledge about the world, about themselves, and even about men, is derived from Mudear’s perspective on male and female relationships, obviously damaged because of her relationship with Ernest: “Each of them wished, whether it was true or not, that Mudear had not raised them with the motto: ‘A man don’t give a damn about you’” (42). This is potentially the most damaging, selfish advice that Mudear gives to her daughters because it means that the loveless existence that they lived as girls will continue as
women: “I tried to tell the girls, tried my best to tell them: a man don’t give a damn about you. No matter how much he claim to love you, even the ones who will eat your dirty drawers don’t really give a damn about you, not really” (106). Love, in the world contained in this purely Mudear saying, is a myth, happiness a falsehood—consequently, no man on earth could possibly love them: “I tried to show them how freeing it is to discover that and really live your life by that. [...] ‘That a man don’t give a damn ‘bout me [...] To say that and know it ain’t got nothing to do with you, that that’s just the way a man is. And when it don’t hurt no more, then you free” (107). Mudear found her “freedom” in believing that Ernest never loved her. Perhaps she continuously repeats this mantra, more like an anti-spiritual hymn, to validate her own selfish existence, to reinforce her belief that Ernest should be perpetually punished for hurting her and deflating the picture of marital perfection that she has before Ernest becomes the master of the house:

It sound so foolish now, but I truly thought that Ernest and me, our getting married was like a wedding of two forces. We would be joining forces, taking the best of both of us [...] his best traits and mine. We was gonna take life by storm. [...] And it did hurt for a while when I realized he didn’t give no more of a damn about me than the man in the moon. The things he did to me didn’t hurt me half as much as realizing that he did ‘em ‘cause he didn’t give a damn. (107)

Mudear claims that this is the reason why she tries to drill into her daughters’ heads why women should not expect love, especially from a man: “That’s what I was trying to save my girls from. From that time—and it eventually come to all women—when you all deep in what you think is love and you get slapped in the face with a rolled
up copy of the Mulberry Clarion newspaper or told what you think or what you are ain’t shit.[...] If you already know that time is coming, then it can’t touch you” (108).

Whatever Mudear’s motivations, it echoes in the minds of her daughters—they never truly take men seriously; Betty’s teenaged boyfriend and her high school “some timer” boyfriend are little more than tools for her physical satisfaction. Similarly, Annie Ruth has so many sexual partners that she has no idea who the father of her baby could possibly be. When Emily does take the now-and-again stab at a serious relationships, they inevitably fail. For, in taking the plunge and attempting a marriage of her own, the motherly advice offered by Mudear is “He’ll lead you a dog’s life! [...] Remember I’m the one who told you. He’ll lead you a dog’s life” (41). Mudear cannot see a marriage as being fruitful because her ideas about two mighty forces coming together as one is disassembled. The worst case scenario for Mudear would be a healthy marriage for one of the Lovejoy women because it would disarm Mudear of her own black and white beliefs about love, relationships, and balance between a man and a woman. Unfortunately for her daughters, this nightmare for Mudear is not yet realized, but it is within reach, as Betty begins to take her boyfriend Cinque more seriously, and Annie Ruth decides that she must censor Mudear’s thoughts in her head, so as not to speak such hopelessness and haplessness in love to her own daughter, Mae Jean. She catches herself speaking like Mudear about men and amends her statement for her newborn daughter: “[...] don’t you be worrying about no men, baby girl. [...] We got all the time in the world for me to tell you all I know ‘bout men—the good and the ugly” (196).

Nonetheless, Mudear paints a horrible picture of a future with any man and because they are still tightly tethered to their mother’s hateful parenting, it is a portrait that her daughters will have to continually erase if they are to be successful in any
relationship or marriage. In a perfect Mudear world, if she has her way, if women must become wives, they should seek first to destroy the destroyer, their husbands, which is what she presumes every man to be. It is the “truth” that guides her life. Even when it is raining outside on a sunny day and the popular expression, “the devil must be beating his wife” is carelessly stated, “[...] Mudear would always say the same thing: ‘Humph, if the devil’s wife had any sense, she’d set his bed on fire while he was sleeping’” (81). There simply is no middle or common ground for women and men to come together in Mudear’s eyes. For Ernest, this means that he is killed by her looking at him with an upturned nose whenever he walks by; for her daughters, it means that they will never experience true love—not from their mother and never from a man. Kill before being killed is her way of viewing relationships between men and women, and no other ideas about matrimony can convince her otherwise. This principle is contradictory to the African-American Archetypal Big Mama because preservation, not destruction of the marital union is the order of the day. From her actions and speech, it is evident that this Whistlin’ Woman does not care or believe in the preferences of Big Mama.

In truth, the African-American Archetypal Big Mama does care what others think because the center of her existence is other. Largely, her children are oblivious to the pedestal box that they place her in, but it is no less significant to Big Mama’s feelings of loneliness. For, in quiet times to herself, the question of whether or not she would change things and become her “own woman” is one that is never uttered; when it is thought of, it is immediately buried under feelings of being needed and appreciated by the faithful who proclaim her to be the crowning glory of the community. Yet the loneliness is still there; it is still a space that can never be filled. As a consequence, her love for her children and
community have pushed out and made impossible even one little space dedicated entirely to her.

By contrast, there is no space in the Whistlin’ Woman for others to enter, lest they take away some of her time and space for herself. The Whistlin’ Woman is fully aware of her own personal hopes and dreams because her life is about pursuing them; she would not even think or dream of relinquishing her own desires in favor of others, especially because her desires are completely and wholeheartedly fulfilled. Instead of there being nothing left for others to claim of her, there is nothing left in the Whistlin’ Woman which gives rooms for others. Instead of the Whistlin’ Woman defining herself and her life by her children, her family members define and live their lives by the Whistlin’ Woman’s skewed standards and definitions about life.

Thus, Mudear’s solitude, rather than being regretted, is embraced. As much as anyone tries to please her, it is appears to be neither wanted nor necessary for her happiness. She is free, absolutely ecstatic and proud that she simply does not fit in with the rest of the world: “Mudear […] didn’t care anything about what people thought about her talents. In fact, not caring was on the Top 10 List of her proudest achievements” (Taking After Mudear 36). This is quite an achievement for Mudear. Nothing, however, makes Mudear happier than the solo gardening that she does at night: “there’s no sign of a weed, no stinging nettle, no dollar weeds, no tufts of nut grass sticking up like unrelenting hairs out of an old man’s ears. Nothing’s unwanted here” (Ugly Ways 216). Outside in the garden, because of Mudear’s work, nothing unwanted lives. Because of Mudear’s perpetual spa day inside the Lovejoy house, everyone who lives there feels unwanted. This distinction of being unloved and unwanted is how each of the Lovejoy daughters classify their lives. Yet, they are not free to define Mudear as the hateful
Whistlin' Woman that she is to anyone outside of family and truly absorb what that means until after her death and her endeavor to pursue and obtain Mae Jean: "[...] the girls didn’t really know how else to put it to strangers, but nobody was really allowed to hate Mudear. It wasn’t a matter of what she did or did not deserve. Deserving did not enter into it. She lived and played by her own set of rules or lack of them. She made you feel that you couldn’t judge her by your piddling standards even if those standards were held by the rest of the world" (Ugly Ways 118). Of course, the Lovejoy daughters know what an island Mudear is, in Mulberry and the world; their own idiosyncrasies reflect their upbringing with such a uniquely careless mother. The daughters are bibliophiles, and their fellow love for books is due to a curiosity to find out about how “normal” people live. As Annie Ruth confesses, “Hell, I used to read books just to find out how normal people, families live” (254). They must have validation that Mudear is not representative of all motherhood or of humanity for that matter. She has to be an anomaly if they are going to be able to live and breathe and attempt to live in a world so different from the one that they grow up in.

While the Lovejoy daughters do not generally share the sickening details of Mudear’s cruelty as a mother with strangers, it does not stop them from talking about her deficiencies amongst themselves: “There in Mudear’s garden, next to the marigolds and tomato plants, they talked about her lovelessness, her heartlessness, her lack of motherliness” (185). At first, they do not realize it, but Mudear hears every word that they say. When the daughters finally catch wind of Mudear listening to them, they are sorely afraid and begin to pray:

They just knew that anyone as powerful as Mudear, a woman able to re-create herself overnight, able to change the patterns of her household
without a fight, able to boss their big strong father around without even lifting her voice, would mete out the kind of punishment they only had read about in the Bible at Sunday school. So, they prayed to God, the towering white bearded God they had seen in pictures to help them, to protect them, to save them from their mother. (186)

What rescues the girls from their trance and collective prayer is Mudear’s voice, admonishing them to come in the house. She is not concerned about them being outside in the dark; her concern is that they might carelessly step on her beloved plants in the dark: “[…] Mudear didn’t say a word to them about their overheard conversation discussing her” (187). Dinner and dishes go by without consequence, and the girls finally prepare themselves for bed before breathing a collective sigh of relief. When Betty, the rock, finally speaks, she says, “I don’t think Mudear cares whether we talk about her or not.” They sat there a while, sly smiles on their faces, considering the possibility of their luck. […] But when they got into their beds, they didn’t sleep. The girls stayed up all night talking about Mudear” (188). Whether or not they feel free to talk about her is also damaging because freely reliving her abuse is like freely pouring salt into a gaping wound even if one is heavily sedated with pain medication. For, at some point, when the drug wears off, great, unimaginable pain is not far away. Mudear’s solitude is a one-of-a-kind, but unfortunately for her daughters, it also makes them joint survivors at sea, holding fast to each other in a relentless dance to keep their heads above water. Mudear, however, moves about freely in her seclusion, as the free and beautiful as a river running out towards the sea.

In this, her freedom and seclusion, Mudear believes that her daughters should be grateful for her version of womanhood. It is not that talking about her in a less than
flattering light surprises Mudear; it is nothing new in her life, and as she even feels she should be the center of attention anyway, she truly does not mind it:

Many times over the years Mudear had overheard her daughters’ ceaseless complaining patter about her. Mudear didn’t care. She had been like that her entire life. As a child, her favorite expression was, ‘So? I don’t care.’ She seemed to believe that she was innately notable, worthy of being the regular topic of conversation. Even when her girls were little and she was still perfecting her suddenly reclusive life, she showed no concern when the stories of how peculiar she was somehow filtered back to her.

*(Taking After Mudear 54-55)*

Isolation is freedom to Mudear because it means that she owes no one. She is the controller, not the controlled. Her life is her own space and her own solitude.

This core credence does not stop Mudear from believing that such ownership is an insufficient quality in raising children. However meager, however unnoteworthy, Mudear believes that her physical presence alone should have been enough for her girls to thrive and grow into women, and she does not understand why her children are unable to resolve themselves to accept the personal encasement that comes as a byproduct of her Choice and change:

Hell, I coulda just walked out and left them orphan girls. But no, I stayed so they could have the benefits of a mama.[...] that’s not the whole reason I stayed. I’m a person, too, and I had my own needs and likes and dislikes. Any anyway, I thought, Shoot, I got this house here with my garden growing out back, a man who keep food on the table and usually keep our butts from freezing, three girls—two of them already able to do things
around the house. Hell, I had stayed for the hard times, why should I have left just when things getting a little better? Why should I go out in the world and try to make my own way when I didn’t have to? But I stayed. Ungrateful hussies. (149)

By staying, this solitary goddess of disparagement nearly destroys all of her children. Her twisted freedom puts her children in chains, but in her mind, it is what her daughters should be proud of: “As far they was concerned, I was always like I was. I was always the strong one who ran my own household. They just took it for granted that that’s the way it was, but they had no idea how long I had to think and plan and work that thing before I became a woman in my own shoes” (43). In her view, simply by being there she typifies the only path to freedom in womanhood. Her example is to be cherished and replicated; being a woman in her “own shoes” is an honor. Further, she did think to protect them in her mind because she at least keeps them from becoming a “wife substitute” for her husband:

[…] to let them girls tell it now, I didn’t do shit to raise ‘em, to help ‘em out the way a mother should. […] Lots of women who turn they households over to another woman, even if it is her eleven-year-old daughter, they don’t pay attention to other changes in the household, but I did. […] If Ernest knew one thing, it was I woulda killed him dead and gladly gone to serve to serve my time in jail for it if he touched one of my girls. ‘Sides, the girls wouldn’a let me go to jail. (152)

The supreme irony is, of course, that Mudear thinks that “lots of women” do what she does in abandoning her children: “Lots of women” may not line up with the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, but they also, largely, do not completely “turn their
households over” to their pre-teenaged daughters. Mudear needs to tell herself this untruth to live with the real truth that she does not, in fact, lay claim to any part in raising her daughters as an archetypal mother—a Big Mama—does.

The other side of the coin, however, is that Mudear really does not care about slighting her children. For, the Whistlin’ Woman chooses with whom and how often she has any self-gratifying escapades, with little to no regard for persons who might be affected by her actions, including her children. She remains on the outskirts of not only her family, but also her community and world because she chooses not to fit in. She is so unlike any of the women that she grew up with, despite what they were all taught as children, about women who rejected African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s heights. The community cannot consent to friendship with a woman who is so vehemently opposed to what they subscribe to with regards to home and family. However, it is of no consequence to the Whistlin’ Woman; in fact, she is indifferent with regards to her interactions with people. She is not, nor has any interest, in becoming the African-American Archetypal Big Mama.

As a Whistlin’ Woman, though, when one’s life is one’s own, there is no love or hate. There is neither balance nor spirit, nothing to ground one in reality. There is no death, but then the subsequent “life” of being one’s “own woman” must also be restrictive of many of the pleasures that make life worth living. If this is indeed freedom, then the Whistlin Woman leaves one wondering if what she deems to be the chains of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama are much better.
CHAPTER 3 NOTES

1 In the novel Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston, Nanny, an African-American Archetypal Big Mama, parallels the African-American woman’s position in society to being the “mules of the world.” At sixteen years old, Janie, the protagonist, is just budding into womanhood, and in order to keep her a “decent” Christian woman, she plans to marry Janie off to a good and “decent” Christian man: “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in the ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see! So de white man throw down the load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up, He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!” Thus, the African-American woman is the cross bearer for the entire race; she must carry the burdens of a harsh life for her man and her family to survive.

2 Please see Appendix B for the full version of the song.

3 Please see Note 1 above.

4 Please see Appendix C for a version of the ballad, popular in the African-American community.

5 When King James commissioned his version of the Bible, he wanted to be sure that his scribes would write in such a way that the wording would be beautiful, and therefore memorable to believers with the entitlement of being able to read. Proverbs are only one branch of sayings that fit the bill; those attributable to King Solomon are especially melodiously written. With respect to the power of three in this instance, Solomon’s book of Ecclesiastes 4:12, of the New King James Version of the Holy Bible, reads as follows:
“Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

6 Please see Appendix D for the full selections.

7 For the full folktale, please see Appendix E.

8 The list of Lovejoy women do’s and don’ts can be found in Appendix F.
CHAPTER 4:
CONCLUSION

FLUFFING THE QUILT

The previous literary analysis of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and her opposite the Whistlin’ Woman, via the Theory of African-American Archetypes, validates their existence in the literature and the lives of African Americans. While there still may be a question about Big Mama or the Whistlin’ Woman being a better existence for African-American mothers to embrace, such vacillation is evidence that that the theory and subsequent criticism provide insight into the culture, for they open up a discussion about expectations versus realities of motherhood in the African-American community.

Towards the close of the novel Ugly Ways, Emily describes to her sisters a conversation that she has with girlfriends about African-American motherhood. One friend is describing to Emily the warmth and security that she feels in her mother when she is hurt and how she specifically turns to her mother to be “loved on” in the manner of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama: “Come on Emily, who do you go to when you need a little tit? When you need to suck on a tit for a while, when you need to cry in somebody’s arms?” (Ansa 231). The woman asks Emily about her comforter, the one person in her life who is the sustainer of all things good and restorative in her life. Apparently, the woman feels that the “correct” answer should be Emily’s mother, her Big Mama. However, when Emily tells her friend that she would definitely petition her sisters for help before her mother, she feels the women “pulling away” from her, as if she is
some sort of alien: “Knew I shouldn’t have [said it] as soon as it was out my mouth. I could just see these women just pull away, you know, just distance themselves from me after that” (231-232). Yet, in this distancing, Emily settles on her belief that it is not her friends’ lack of understanding for her decision to seek her sister’s counsel first; it is not that these other African-American women cannot or do not understand what she is speaking of with regards to a poor excuse for an African-American mother. She comes to the conclusion that they know exactly what she is talking about—they, too, have experienced a Whistlin’ Woman in some form or fashion in their lives but because of the archetype of Big Mama, speaking against that inviolability is unacceptable:

I don’t think it’s that they don’t know what I was talking about. It was more like they’d rather not think about it because then they have to think about their own lives and mothers and even what kind of mothers they are or will be, know what I mean? It’s like as long as we all keep talking and thinking like every black mother in the world is this great wonderful self-sacrificing matriarch […]. (231-232)

then the implication is that the African-American community will be fine.

During book tours promoting both Ugly Ways and Taking After Mudear, author Tina McElroy Ansa discovered that many African-American women, her readers, found release and relief in the novel Ugly Ways because of the characterization of a mother so unlike the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. For years, many of Mrs. Ansa’s readers, like the Lovejoy daughters, carried the shame and hurt from living with such a woman like Mudear (a Whistlin’ Woman) and felt incapable of relaying their feelings to anyone for fear of being misunderstood and shunned as their mothers did not fit into the African-American Archetype. Similarly, many men admitted to Mrs. Ansa that Mudear’s
influence upon the lives of her daughters explained why some of women with whom they came into contact were incapable of forming a healthy, intimate relationships with them. The bare truth is that not every mother in the African-American community is an African-American Archetypal Big Mama; some are in fact Whistlin’ Women, but this certainty does not make it any less difficult to share and accept.

An examination of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s significance and permanence must also include her opposite the Whistlin’ Woman, for the divergence contains a truth about the African-American community as well, bringing further insight into the cultural machinations and expectations of many African Americans with respect to motherhood. While shunned, the Whistlin’ Woman is also a representation of motherhood in the African-American community, regardless of the fact that many would prefer to imagine otherwise. As Betty in Ansa’s Ugly Ways adds, the African-American community has the habit of “[...] not counting the women who have children on welfare or who are drug addicts or who are children still themselves”(232). These women are African-American mothers as well; they just do not fit into the African-American Archetype of what a mother, a Big Mama, should be:

‘You know as well as I do that those women aren’t considered ‘real black mothers. They just lazy black ‘hos,’ Annie Ruth said. ‘That is, ‘til they are of a certain age and become grandmothers themselves, taking in their babies’ babies.’ ‘Yeah, then they real mothers,’ Betty offered. [...]‘Well,’ Emily said. [...] ‘its like as long as we don’t think about our mothers as anything but these huge black breasts oozing chocolate milk on demand, we keep all our demons in check.’ (231- 232)

In this exchange between the Lovejoy women, who are all too familiar with the
Whistlin' Woman, what is posited is that the African-American Archetypal Big Mama is simply that, an archetype that many African Americans hold in their minds in the face of any differing realities. Big Mama, therefore, is not only the mother that many African Americans may ascribe to be—for some, she is the mother that many African Americans desired in their own homes. Thus, the argument is not centered on the existence of the Whistlin’ Woman; she does in fact exist, but she is denied by the community because she does not typify an acceptable, recognizable pattern of Africana motherhood in the African-American Archetypal Big Mama. Even more interesting is the suggestion that Whistlin’ Women will eventually become Big Mamas, with little more than the passage of time. This is especially worth further discussion (not here) as it is a belief which would certainly support the Definitive Characteristic of pronounced solitude of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama; the premise alludes to the possibility that the African-American mother’s season of Choice as the Whistlin’ Woman has passed, leaving her with nothing but regretful memories and advice sweetened because of her new outwardly enforced solitude.

Therefore, in response to the first original research question—What makes an archetype particularly African American?—the characterization of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and the Whistlin’ Woman are distinctive because they are dependant upon the unique experiences of African Americans, which are often beyond the conscious control of many African-American people. As we have seen, African-American Archetypes are inherited from repeated occurrences of African and African-American ancestors. Instead of a genetic inheritance, African Americans inherited the oral tradition, with all of its images, beliefs, and patterns, (and thus archetypes) which causes practitioners of that folklore to react in a similar manner. Therefore, African-
American Archetypes are not genetically inherited, as Jung decrees in his theory, but they are no less powerful in their inheritance as demonstrated in the previous criticism because African-American Archetypes are passed down with the transmission of African folklore as its driving force. Africans never disappeared from the continent; they meshed with the harsh experiences of everyday life in America and became revamped, reborn. When all physical possessions, traditions, conditions of life were stripped away, the only inheritance that could be given as a marker of culture was folklore. As Joseph Holloway writes,

Enslaved Africans, not free to openly transport kinship, courts, religion and material cultures, were forced to disguise or abandon them during the middle passage. Instead, they dematerialized their cultural artifacts during the middle passage to rematerialize African culture on their arrival in the New World. Africans arrived in the New World capable of using Old World knowledge to create New World realities. (39)

Therefore, the collective unconscious of African-American Archetypes in which many African Americans approach life and subsequently literature was formed and fashioned on the continent of Africa.

Consequently, the ways in which African Americans approach life is largely guided by folklore. Folklore is at the heart of the Theory of African-American Archetypes and stands as the foundational evidence as to how the theory can be extended to other cultures, specifically why such specificities create a thorough understanding of a given people and culture. In criticism of non-mainstream literature, culture, not assimilation, is the key to unlocking how and why traditions exist in a given people, so folklore contained in such literary works provides insight into the ways in which non-
mainstream people speak, act, and think.

The lore used here to illuminate the African-American Archetypal Big Mama exemplar and the Whistlin’ Women included Africana spirituality, Soul Food, and proverbs, but there are other ideas, symbols, and themes, such as the proverbial physical and/ or emotional journey of many post ante-bellum African Americans from the South to the North which may be used in conjunction with the Theory of African-American Archetypes as well. There are also other recognizable Africana characters such as the trickster figure, which may be substantiated as an authentic African-American or Africana Archetypes.

After all, the purpose of literary criticism is to extract more from a given text than simple surface details—to truly interact with what one is reading. Therefore, in response to the second research question for this study—How and why do African-American Archetypes present a fuller understanding of African-American literature and culture?—Big Mama and the Whistlin’ Woman are clarified as examples of motherhood in the African-American community. As demonstrated in this dissertation, employing the Theory of African-American Archetypes through criticism provides explanation for the African-American community’s reverence for Big Mama and its subsequent attempt to protect her, leaving little room for difference or acceptance in her counterpart, the Whistlin’ Woman.

This particular dichotomy is key in the implementation of the Theory of African-American Archetypes, for in order to ascribe literary validity to these archetypes, critics must be completely honest about why, for example, African Americans have unconsciously thrust Big Mama into the seemingly unreachable realm of perfection. As Annie Pratt explains, “...archetypes are patterns which reside in the unconscious and are
defined as specific images insofar as they appear such to the conscious mind” (164). Big Mama’s love is a pattern, indelibly marked in the language, succeeding actions, and the lore of Africana peoples; it is maintained in the culturally collective unconscious of many African Americans. Inasmuch as she may be a reality, she is also an archetype, which means that even those who have mothers or grandmothers more like the Whistlin’ Woman are still able to distinguish between the two and often crave Big Mama over their “unfortunate” alternate, the Whistlin’ Woman.

As the lore dictates, inasmuch as Big Mama is adored, her opposite is despised. Unlike Big Mama, the Whistlin’ Woman, the deviant mother, shows “iradequate” care for her own family, as her main interest is creating a space and a place for herself. Yet, she, too, serves a purpose. Defining the archetype by negation has a purpose. As Jung tells us, “There is no consciousness without discrimination of opposites. […] Nothing can exist without its opposite; the two were one in the beginning and will be one again in the end” (Jung 96). Therefore, even African-American Archetypal characters that are opposites exist for each other, and in spite of each other. Further, community reactions to both Big Mama and the Whistlin’ Woman serve the same universal purpose of emotional survival within the African-American community. Without one, the other has no purpose; together they provide clarity about what is and is not acceptable for the healthy growth of the African-American community. Accordingly, consideration and examination of both women reveal their impact and detriment to the physical, emotional, and spiritual survival of many African Americans, as well as define why they are particularly African American:

An archetype is in no sense just an annoying prejudice; it becomes so only when it is in the wrong place. In themselves, archetypal images are among
the highest values of the human psyche; they have peopled the heavens of all races from time immemorial. To discard them as valueless would be a distinct loss. Our task is not, therefore, to deny the archetype, but to dissolve the projections, in order to restore their contents to the individual who has involuntarily lost them by projecting them outside himself.

(84)

In offering this Theory of African-American Archetypes as a way to approach a literary work, it is by no means my intent to state that this is the only way to critique all African-American literature. For the novels used in the justification of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and Whistlin’ Woman, one would do well to examine other forms of criticism which lend themselves well to Africana culture. Bess-Montgomery’s Theory of Africana Spirituality readily comes to mind because while components of spirituality were used in elucidation of the African-American Archetypal Big Mama, the criticism here did not even begin to scratch the surface with regards to the other African deities and spiritual symbolism contained in each of the novels; for example, Shango is definitely at work in Naylor’s Mama Day, through the power of the lightening storms in the novel. What is important is to be aware of other forms of literary criticism that define themselves by the beauty of the African-American experience, not in spite of it. The Theory of African-American Archetypes is simply a theory, which means that it offers a way to interpret the literature of African Americans in such a way as to highlight that which may otherwise be dismissed as inconsequential in mainstream criticism. It is my sincere hope to present a theory and example of criticism that offers a greater depth of understanding into the African-American experience as it is expressed in both the folklore and the literature. As Bressler writes,
African-American criticism challenges established ideologies, racial boundaries and racial prejudice. It also acknowledges and incorporates the writings of past African-American literature, the major historical movements that have influenced African-American writings, and both historical and current attitudes toward African Americans. [...] Its strong historical sense, understanding of racial issues, and concept of what being black means combine to create a school of criticism that is unique and multifaceted. (244)

In other words, these forms of criticism give special attention to the fact that African-American literature reflects the extraordinary circumstances that African Americans have and will continue to experience in this country with regards to race. This reality is vital to the feasibility of the Theory of African-American Archetypes; just as African Americans are undeniably American, they are also undeniably disconnected from mainstream America, in many instances, due to the ways in which African Americans were and unfortunately, in some instances, still are perceived in mainstream American culture and the world.

Unfortunately, the danger in accepting or embracing this difference from a negative standpoint is that this “difference” has the ability to render African Americans as strange and inadequate. Of the Black Arts movement, Bressler writes, “Perhaps its major strength, its visionary gleam, was also its major weakness, alienating African Americans from other segments of society by attempting to establish its own black nation and making blacks a group of people seemingly standing apart from history” (249). This can be extended to the body of African-American literature in total, for often, in attempting to illuminate the brilliance of that difference, some will only ever see that
there is simply a difference.

This assumption is not only erroneous in mainstream America, but also for many African-American literary critics as well. Henry Louis Gates Jr., author of a definitive text on African-American criticism, says that African-American writers and critics, including himself, must redefine ‘theory,’ “not to mystify black literature, or to obscure its several delightful modes of creating meaning, but to begin to suggest how richly textured and layered that black literary artistry indeed is” (xx). In this way, Gates declares that there is something inherently different about African-American writing, but that this distinct quality is tenable and should not be limited to the confines of previous schools of thought regarding literary theory and criticism: “[...] I hope to enhance the reader’s experience of black texts by identifying levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise be mediated, or buried beneath the surface. [...] to demystify the curious notion that theory is the province of the Western tradition, something alien or removed from a so-called noncanonical tradition such as that of the Afro-American” (xx). The Theory of African-American Archetypes is an answer to that invitation to extend the dialogue and the criticism of the multi-faceted lives and literature of African Americans.

African-American Archetypes, therefore, are affective markers of a people and the cultural particularities that shape their lives and quite often African-American literature:

In looking at a picture, we may stand close to it and analyze the details of brush work and palette knife. This corresponds roughly to the rhetorical analysis of the new critics in literature. At a little distance back, the design comes into clearer view, and we study rather the content represented [...] the further back we go, the more conscious we are of the organizing
design. [...] we often have to ‘stand back’ from the poem to see its archetypal organization. (Frye 140)

The Theory of African-American Archetypes, then, serves as a means to an end in understanding not only the deeper picture, but also the greater picture. For in “standing back,” as Frye puts it, one is afforded the opportunity to gauge what a given story means, here of what the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and the Whistlin’ Woman mean to the community of African Americans.

By specifying and clearly illuminating the African-American Archetypal Big Mama and the Whistlin’ Woman in literature, one not only gives credence and enlightenment to works of African-American literature, but also to the complexity of the African-American experience. As Jung noted, archetypes “give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors [and are] the psychic residue of innumerable experiences of the same type, of joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history”(66). When unlocked, the historical and cultural nuances contained in the complex African-American Archetypal characters Big Mama and her opposite, the Whistlin’ Woman, reveal themselves as quilt panels of this theory, held together with the threads of folklore, providing a warm quilt of insight—inheritances to be valued both within the homes of African Americans and the infinite gallery of humanity.
Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues by Ida Cox

I hear these women raving about their monkey-man,
About their trifling husbands and their no-good friends
These poor women sit around all day and moan
Wondering why their wandering papa don’t come home.
Now when you got a man don’t never be on the square,
Because if you do he’ll have a woman everywhere.
I never was known to treat no one man right,
I keep them working hard both day and night.

I’ve got a disposition and a way of my own,
When my man starts to kicking I let him find a new home,
I get full of good liquor, walk in the street all night,
Go home and put my man out if he don’t act right.
Wild women don’t worry,
Wild women don’t have the blues.

You never get nothing by being an angel child,
You’d better change your way an’ get real wild.
I wanta’ tell you something, I wouldn’t tell you no lie,
Wild women are the only kind that ever get by.
Wild women don’t worry,
Wild women don’t have the blues.

(Dance 119- 120)
APPENDIX B

The theme of "Frankie and Albert" has many precedents in English, Scottish, and other European balladry—the revenge of a scorned woman. [...] There are many versions of the ballad, and few singers have versions in common. Every rendition is an open invitation to improvise...Some accounts say Frankie’s revenge was carried out with a knife, others with a gun, the exact caliber of which is determined by the rhyme required. [...] Some prefer to have Albert meet his fate on the barroom floor, others in his room with his latest conquest, Alice Fry (or Bly, or Giles, or another similar sounding name).

Frankie and Albert

(also known as Frankie and Johnnie)

Frankie was a good girl,
As everybody knows.
She paid a hundred dollars
For Albert’s suit of clothes.
He was her man and he done her wrong.

Frankie went down to the corner saloon,
Wasn’t going to be there long,
Asked the bartender had he seen her Albert
‘Cause he done been home and gone.
He was her man and he done her wrong.

Well, the bartender he told Frankie,
Can’t lie to you if I try,
Old Albert been here an hour ago
And gone home with Alice Fry,
He was her man and he done her wrong.

Frankie went down to Albert’s house,
Only a couple of blocks away,
Peeped in the keyhole of his door,
Saw Albert lovin’ Alice Fry.
He was her man and he done her wrong.

Frankie called out to Albert,
Albert said I don’t hear.
If you don’t come to the woman you love
Goin’ to haul you out of here.
He was her man and he done her wrong.

Frankie she shot old Albert
And she shot him three or four times
Said I’ll hang around a few minutes
And see if Albert’s dyin.’
He was my man and he done me wrong.

An iron-tired wagon
With ribbons all hung in black
Took old Albert to the buryin’ ground
And it didn’t bring him back.
He was her man and he done her wrong.
Frankie told the sheriff
What goin’ to happen to me?
Said looks like from the evidence
Goin’ to be murder first degree.
He was your man and he done you wrong.

Dark was the night.
Cold was the ground,
The last words I heard Frankie say,
I done laid old Albert down.
He was my man and he done me wrong.

Last time I heard of Frankie
She was settin’ in her cell,
Sayin’ Albert done me wrong
And for that I sent him to hell.
He was my man and he done me wrong.

I ain’t goin’ to tell no stories,
I ain’t going to tell no lies.
The woman who stole Frankie’s Albert
Was the girl they call Alice Fry.
He was her man and he done her wrong.

(Courlander 394 – 396)
Appendix C

The following song games are forms of play that reinforce the significance of mother and her inextricably link to Soul Food, providing sustenance for the body and the spirit. They are taken from the text entitled Step it Down, a collection of “games, plays, songs, and stories from the Afro-American heritage.” The source of the stories is a woman named Bessie Smith Jones, who remembered these treasure troves of Africanisms that made their way to rural southern Georgia, her childhood home, and St. Simons Island, the home that she made with her husband. Mrs. Jones’ explanations of the rhymes are in parentheses.

Juba

Juba this and Juba that  
(That means a little of this and a little of that.)

And Juba killed a yellow cat  
(That means mixed-up food might kill the white folks. And They didn’t care if it did, I don’t suppose.)

And get over double-trouble, Juba  
(Someday they meant they would get over double trouble.)

You sift-a the meal, you give me the husk
You cook-a the bread, you give me the crust
You fry the meat, you give me the skin,
And that’s where my mama’s trouble begin
(You see, so that’s what it mean—the mother would always be talking to them about she wished she could give them some of that good hot cornbread or hot pies or what not. But she couldn’t. She had to wait and give that old stuff that was left over. And then they began to sing it and play it.)

(Jones & Hawes 37-38)

This little rhyme reinforces the African-American Archetypal Big Mama’s desire to feed her children, even when it was impossible. In giving them the scraps, she was still trying to at least give them a taste of the best.
Just From the Kitchen

Just from the kitchen,

Shoo lie loo,

With a handful of biscuits,

Shoo lie loo,

Oh, Miss Mary,

Shoo lie loo,

Fly away over yonder,

Shoo lie loo.

(This is just a little skip. We’d do it in the yard or either in the house if it was raining. But it means this, you know, that the children would sometimes go to the kitchen and they’d give us some biscuits. At that time, some of the children they didn’t have biscuits often. And when they’d get biscuits, it was really fun. I think ‘shoo lie loo’ means something like ‘I’m really glad!’ …He’s so glad—he’s free and got his own bread so he can fly away over yonder…He’s so glad he got freedom food!”

(Jones & Hawes 51)

The African-American Archetypal Big Mama was so happy to provide her children with real food, and her family members were even happier to receive it!
APPENDIX D

The Man Who Took a Water Mother for His Bride

The mae d’agua, or water mother, is a familiar character in the beliefs of Afro-Brazilians. The water mother is a denizen of lakes and rivers, in some tales malevolent, in others benign. In the [following] story, the water mother is taken as a bride by a farmer on his promise that he will never ridicule her for not being human, a theme that is widely known in Africa, Asia and Europe.

There was a poor country man named Domingos living alone in his cabin not far from the edge of a certain river. He had no family whatsoever, and as for his garden, it barely produced enough to keep him alive. No matter how he cared for his corn, it did not flourish. Other farmers who lived near Domingos were also poor and wretched, but Domingos was the most unlucky of them all.

One morning Domingos went to his corn to take a few ears to eat. As he went from one stalk to another he noticed that some of the ears had already been picked, and he wondered who had been heartless enough to take the food from his mouth. The next day he went again to the field and swore to catch the thief and punish him. So that night he took his cane knife and went out and hid in his cornfield at a place where he could see to all sides. He put grass and straw over him so that he would be invisible. He waited, while the night grew long and the moon close. Then, on the side of the field near the river, there was the rustle of someone walking through the cornstalks. Now he was awake. He clutched his knife, thinking, “I will surely kill the one who is coming to rob me.” He heard the person approaching. He heard the sound of an ear being broken from its stalk. He heard another ear being taken. He saw the shadow of a person. He saw the person, and he left his hiding place and ran forward. What he found surprised him, for the
one taking his corn was a water woman who lived with others of her kind in the depths of the river. He seized her, shouting and threatening harm, but he did not strike the water mother. The moon was shining brightly and he saw her beauty. He said, “Why do you steal the food that barely keeps me alive?” She answered, “I was hungry, I meant you no harm.” He said, “I should punish you.” But she answered, “Let me go. I will return to the river. Henceforth I will go elsewhere for food.” Domingos’ heart softened. It was warmed by the water woman’s voice and her appearance. He said, “Why should I let you go?” She answered, “How would it benefit you to keep me?” And Domingos said, “Why, if I kept you I would not be alone. I would have a wife like anyone else.” She said, “It is not possible. When has a water person ever married with a land person?”

But Domingos was captivated by her voice and her beauty. He asked her to remain. He supplicated her. At last, moved by the warmth of his entreaties, the water woman said: “We have been told by the old people that those who live on land and in the water cannot mix. Once before it happened that a young water woman was taken as a wife by a land person. At first all went well. But after a while the man began to abuse her. He did not treat her as well as in the beginning. And as time passed he began to ridicule her origins. He said with contempt, ‘What can I expect from you, since you a mere water woman?’ And he spoke this way about her among the people of the village. And one night he beat her, saying, ‘Water woman! What are you doing living in my house among human?’ She departed from his house then, she returned to the river. The water people said, ‘It has always been this way. We must never try to live with the land people.’”

Domingos answered her, saying: “In my eyes you are not a water woman. You are only a woman. What do I care where you come from? Stay here with me, live in my house with me.” And so the water woman stayed. She went to his house with him. She
became his wife. And because of that, Domingos’ fortunes changed. The corn in his field grew large ears. His goats and cattle multiplied. Other people who lived nearby began to praise Domingos for his industry. Whereas once he had been too poor to listen to, now they listened respectfully when he spoke, because he was a man of substance. Domingos built a new house. People came to him for help when they were in need. He had much surplus corn hanging from the branches of the large tree that shaded his roof. But Domingos never stopped to think about where his good fortune came from. He became arrogant. And one evening after he had been drinking to excess he began to abuse his wife. He said, “Our children are bad-mannered. Why have you set them such a bad example?” He said, “Why is it that while I work hard in the field you do nothing?” He said, “The people who live nearby, they say bad things about you. Why are you so careless in your ways?” Domingos went on this way, accusing her and abusing her, but she did not reply to him. And her silence angered Domingos still more. He said, “You are a sullen woman. Why don’t you speak when you are spoken to?” Still his wife said nothing. And at last Domingos shouted at her, “Mae d’agua! Water woman! You who came out of the river!”

When she heard these words, the water woman arose from where she was sitting. She went out the door of the cabin. Domingos followed her, shouting curses at the water people. But something happened to Domingos. He found that he could not walk, for his feet were rooted to the ground. He saw his wife go toward the river. One by one his children came from he house and followed their mother. When she reached the river’s edge the woman went into the water and disappeared. Her children entered the water and disappeared. Domingos saw his goats and cattle going toward the river. One by one his goats entered the water. One by one his cattle entered the water. They descended. They
were seen no more. Domingos cried out. He tried to follow, but he could not move from where he stood. Then he saw the corn ears that hung in his large tree begin to move. One by one the ears moved through the air as though they were flying. They went to the river. They went into the water and disappeared. And after that, Domingos’ house and everything that was in’t moved toward the river. Domingos called out, “My house! My house!” But the house went forward and entered the river. The fences Domingos had built to hold his cattle departed. The big tree that had shaded his departed. The palms that grew all around departed. Everything that had belonged to Domingos departed and followed the water woman into the river. Only then did Domingos’ feet become unrooted. He went here, he went there, looking for things that once belonged to him. Everything was gone. Domingos had nothing. And he lived to the end of his days as the poorest of all men.

(Courlander 246-248)
APPENDIX E

...Mudear had a long litany of things Lovejoy women did and did not do:

Lovejoy woman love pretty clothes.
Lovejoy women are strong as mules.
But Lovejoy women go to nothing when they get a cold.
Lovejoy women can cook.
Lovejoy women keep dirty noses.
Lovejoy women can arrange weeds.
Lovejoy women don’t get no tapes.
Lovejoy women don’t wear no anklets.
Lovejoy women don’t take no tea for the fever. ([Mudear] had to explain that one. ‘It means you don’t take no shit. You so bad you won’t even take a soothing tea to break your fever.’)
Lovejoy women have shoulders like men.
Lovejoy women are terrible liars.
Lovejoy women don’t wear no cheap clothes.
Lovejoy women don’t wear no Hoyt’s cologne.
Lovejoy women don’t wear no costume jewelry.

(Ansa Ugly Ways 222-223)
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